The Art of Espionage

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Rating:	Mature
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Fandoms:	Sonic the Hedgehog - All Media Types, Sonic the Hedgehog (Video Games), Sonic the Hedgehog (IDW Comics)
Relationships:	Espio the Chameleon & Original Character(s), Charmy Bee & Espio the Chameleon & Vector the Crocodile, Espio the Chameleon & Vector the Crocodile, Charmy Bee & Espio the Chameleon
Characters:	Espio the Chameleon, Vector the Crocodile, Charmy Bee, Original Sonic the Hedgehog Characters, Sonic the Hedgehog, Dr. Eggman | Dr. Robotnik, Other Character Tags to Be Added, Vanilla the Rabbit, Cream the Rabbit
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The Art of Espionage

by Abbie_Lauren2024

Summary

When Kaito was forced to flee from his abusive clan, the least he expected was to stumble across an abandoned young bee and start working alongside an ambitious crocodile as a private investigator. But now, with a new name and a ragtag new group of friends, he finally starts to believe that perhaps he is truly free for good.

But *no one* betrays the clan.

And the past has a way of catching up to you.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes

Chapter 1: Arc 1: Prologue

Chapter Summary

> ”They’re beautiful, Dokura San.” Yuki smiled as she helped dry off the young chameleon hatchlings, gently running a towel over their tender scales as they chirped in pleasure. The first hatchling was noticeably larger than his brother and a dark forest green color, the second one already working on his balance and bearing deep yellow scales. Of course they would learn to change their colors to blend into their surroundings, but it was a common belief among their kind that children were born with the hue that would represent their future. Green and yellow were often associated with liveliness and courage, both promising colors for their royal lineage. “Ketsu is slim but healthy, and Mugai looks like he will become a great ninja like his father.”

Chapter Notes

> Hey everyone, happy Chaotix Tuesday! And welcome to my new Espio origins fic!! This chameleon shot up to one of my favorite characters after the casefiles, and after finding a sad amount of Espio-centric, plot-centered fics out there for him I decided to change that lol ^^
>
> As always comments and kudos are greatly appreciated, and I hope you enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Ten years ago…

”They’re beautiful, Dokura San.” Yuki smiled as she helped dry off the young chameleon hatchlings, gently running a towel over their tender scales as they chirped in pleasure. The first hatchling was noticeably larger than his brother and a dark forest green color, the second one already working on his balance and bearing deep yellow scales. Of course they would learn to change their colors to blend into their surroundings, but it was a common belief among their kind that children were born with the hue that would represent their future. Green and yellow were often associated with liveliness and courage, both promising colors for their royal lineage. “Ketsu is slim but healthy, and Mugai looks like he will become a great ninja like his father.”

”Why has the third one not hatched yet?” Dokura demanded, her deep crimson scales brighting slightly in aggravation. “It’s been far too long.”

”Is something wrong with the egg, Yuki?” Kuroshi, the leader of their clan, demanded, and Yuki paled.

”N-no, San.” She stammered, glancing over at the egg in worry. She knew that tone. “I’m sure your final child will hatch soon. Perhaps I could offer some assistance…”

”No.” Kuroshi growled, and Yuki flinched. “If a hatchling is not strong enough to free itself from it’s egg then it is not strong enough to survive in the outside world. Especially not in our clan. You know this.”

”Yes but…” Yuki trailed off as she glanced over at the final egg, dread building within her. She had seen eggs be discarded far too often to be naive of what happened to the weak, but after watching over these three unhatched chameleons for so long she had grown attached. She sucked in a sharp breath and nodded. “Of course. I apologize.”

”Good. I will not have a weak child to dishonor our legacy.” Kuroshi glanced at the egg with distain. “Our children will grow and compete for leadership of the entire force. I will not be bothered with this one, as it has been far too long. You can take it away now—it is probably dead.”

Yuki’s stomach dropped to her feet as the dismissive tone. Take young Kaito’s egg? To the cliffside? Where, to ensure he wouldn’t later hatch and suffer, she must…

”Yuki. Now.” Kuroshi demanded, and Dokura nodded.

”It must be done. No use in prolonging the inevitable.” She added, and Yuki quickly scooped up the egg into her arms. Her tail tightened it’s coil in apprehension as she quickly bowed and hurried out, leaving the other two to imprint on their parents.

She hurried through their village, head down as the other chameleons habitually made way for her hasting figure. It was well known that the vibrant teal kunochi was the head servant to their clan leaders and was to be respected without question, and she wasn’t one to complain. They treated her like their own daughter although she knew she would never succeed them, and although she was well acquainted with the order of their clan she was never quite at ease with various customs.

Especially not the discarding of late hatchers.

She could understand the strict rules of never leaving the village without proper reason and never conversing with anyone outside the clan, since those were in place for their own protection. But other orders such as outcasting the weak and disposing of eggs? Yuki’s own mother was staying in a village nearby of elderly chameleons who were too sick to serve the clan any longer, and although she missed her terribly what was she supposed to do?

If there was one rule above all the others, that was to never leave the clan.

Never *disobey* the clan.

Never disrespect the clan leaders.

Weakness lead to banishment, but betrayal lead to death.

Yuki was brought back to the present when she felt the egg in her arms jolt slightly, her heart stopping in her chest. She hurriedly set the egg down and watched it intently, not daring to help it hatch but still hoping that the youngling inside would be strong enough. “Come on Kaito… please… you can do it…”

There! A small pip had appeared in the side of the egg where the child’s horn has pierced the shell, a few more cracks running along the side as the hatchling strove to escape. Yuki’s heart leaped in her chest as it’s horn rammed the side of the egg again, struggling hard to get it’s head out. “Yes… yes you are doing so well… be the warrior you are destined to become.”

Finally a small purple head broke through the ivory shell, the young chameleon’s eyes still tightly closed as he panted from exertion. Grimacing slightly he turned his head to the side, using his horn to break more of the already-fractured egg as his little legs kicked in the back to separate the two halves of the shell. The moment he was free Yuki scooped him up, hugging him close to her chest and trying to help him keep warm.

The small chameleon was one of the most precious things she had ever seen, with a bright yellow horn and slightly smaller than usual but that was nothing to be worried about as she was certain he would grow. She glanced over at the cliff she had been heading towards, stomach churning as she thought about how close this child had been to never even making it out of his egg. Now at least she could bring him back with her where he would be reunited with his parents and brothers, able to honestly tell them that he had hatched by himself before she could dispose of him.

With a soft smile she looked back at his beautiful purple scales, the color of nobility and wisdom. She believed it had to be a good omen for someone who had escaped the jaws of death and emerged into the world with a predestined purpose to rise to leadership of his clan. She gently drew him closer to herself as he shivered. “Welcome to the world, young Kaito.”

Chapter End Notes

Whelp, looks like Kaito has finally come into the world! Boy he has no idea what’s in store…

See ya in the next chapter! ^^

Chapter 2: Will You Never Learn?

Chapter Summary

> *The present…*
>
> Kaito scrambled to his feet and got back in position, tail curling behind him in agitation. How could he have let his father knock him down like that? And in front of his *brothers* no less? He could hear Mugai chortling behind him until his father looked over, the icy glare of his elder causing him to immediately sober.

Chapter Notes

> Hey everyone, and welcome to the second chapter of The Art of Espionage! I hope you enjoy! :D
>
> As always comments and kudos are appreciated <333

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The present…

Kaito scrambled to his feet and got back in position, tail curling behind him in agitation. How could he have let his father knock him down like that? And in front of his *brothers* no less? He could hear Mugai chortling behind him until his father looked over, the icy glare of his elder causing him to immediately sober.

”This is not a game, my sons.” Kuroshi told them firmly, eyes narrowing as his shining black scales dulled a bit in disappointment. That glare turned to Kaito, who shrank a bit on instinct. The action only seemed to vex Kuroshi further. “Do not cower away from me, Kaito. A true warrior never retreats and never shows fear to his enemy.”

”I apologize, father.” Kaito straightened, getting back into position and mentally chiding himself for being weak. “We can—“

Kaito yelped as Kuroshi suddenly disappeared from sight, signaling that their training was about to begin again. The younger chameleon immediately transformed his purple scales to vanish as well, less smoothly than his father but he was still learning. The dojo became deathly silent as the two ninjas prepared to spar, both Ketsu and Mugai holding their breaths. Kaito glanced over at his dark yellow brother, remembering how he would help him with learning stealth. The youngest chameleon knew how it was—his parents never tried to hide

the fact that he was a late hatcher from his knowledge and it only motivated him to work harder. He was very clearly the scrawniest of his brothers with oversized feet that he tripped over often, Yuki doing her best to prevent the teasing but unfortunately unable to do anything about Mugai's headstrong urge to finish a fight. While Ketsu would acknowledge that his little brother was down and back away honorably, Mugai would take advantage and pounce, pummeling Kaito until his father finally snapped at him to stop.

"You are strong, Mugai. A force to be reckoned with." Their father would say. *"But strength without honor is a dangerous thing. Where is your dignity? Where is your sense? You must learn to ensure that your mind is as healthy as your body."*

Mugai hated that saying. Late at night after Yuki would extinguish their candles and the brothers would whisper to each other the eldest would voice his frustrations. *"I don't understand. Our clan operates on showing ourselves no mercy, and if I am strong enough to eliminate my target then why shouldn't I to get it over with faster? Isn't Father always telling us that we must have strength to maintain peace?"*

"We are hard on ourselves so that we may show mercy to others." Ketsu reasoned. *"We need to protect our clan and help the weak get stronger. Everyone will look up to us one day for answers, and what kind of village will we lead if we show them that brute force is the way to get what you want?"*

"Yuki says that inner peace should be esteemed higher than power." Kaito added quietly, and Mugai scoffed.

"You both are wimps. Besides, you know it'll only be one of us to lead after we defeat the others in the Final Trial." He huffed. *"Why do you think we're hiding away in this tiny little village when we could be out there asserting our superiority over all of Mobius? I've heard that there's this guy called Dr. Eggman who's terrorizing everybody and the only one keeping him at bay is this hedgehog kid around our age and a couple other Mobians who might be even younger."*

"Wait, what?" Ketsu sat up in his bed. *"Now how did you get news of the outside world? We're not supposed to—"*

"Yeah yeah, rules and customs or whatever." Mugai rolled over. *"Mind your own stupid business, Ketsu. Do you* want *me to come over there and bash your head in?"*

The conversation had died out after that, but it had never left Kaito's memory. Yes they would banish the sickly and older chameleons who refused to pull their weight anymore, but if they were still willing to fight to get better then the rest of the clan would come along side them to help them return to full health. It was all about serving the village and how they could all support each other—even if the only thing one could do was bake or weave then they were still tolerated. It was the indolent souls who wished to die in peace who got their indirect desire—banished from the clan forever and having their name dishonored.

"Kaito!" Ketsu yelped, and Kaito snapped back to reality when he realized he'd been daydreaming. Adrenaline surged through his system as he struggled to get his scales to turn

invisible again, suddenly tackled to the floor by his father and having his face pressed into the rug. Kuroshi's eyes were blazing, and he turned over to his second-eldest as well.

"Ketsu!" He barked. "This is a sparring exercise! How will he ever learn if you warn him of my approaches?"

"I'm… I'm sorry father…" Ketsu paled, and Kuroshi sighed.

"As you should be. But the responsibility lies on the one who had shown such weakness as to *need* assistance." Kuroshi's other hand came to grab the back of Kaito's neck, holding him in place as the child fought the urge to squirm. "Well, Kaito? What do you have to say for yourself?"

"I apologize, Father." Kaito choked out, every primal instinct in him screaming to try to get away. "It won't happen again."

"You've said that countless times and have yet to follow through!" Kuroshi growled and Kaito flinched. Wrong answer. "It is better to not promise rather than to promise and not fulfill. Better to be merely incompetent than a liar as well. Remember that."

Kuroshi got off and stepped back, and Kaito nearly sighed with relief. Mind dulled from exhaustion and adrenaline, he began to stand as well.

That was a mistake.

"Did I give you permission to rise?" Kuroshi snarled, and on instinct Kaito vanished from sight, scales turning invisible despite the proven knowledge that attempting to escape punishment counted as disobeying the clan customs. Combine that with the disrespect of standing too early and Kaito knew he had messed up. Again. "Kaito, show yourself! Our sparring is over!"

Well he was too deep in now. He remained invisible and held his breath, silently backing away and doing his best to tread lightly, panic rising as phantom pains of getting choked, beaten or cut ached across his skin. He already had violet bruises blossoming across his scales from yesterday! How many times would he fail until he finally learned his lesson?

"Kaito, returning to my sight is a direct order." Kuroshi growled. "You know what happens when you disobey!"

Both his brothers stiffened along side him, Ketsu's wide, guilty eyes darting around the room in fear for his youngest sibling. Kaito almost felt sick, fight-or-flight refusing to let his scales return to their usual purple hue. Although he knew that it was foolish there was a terrified stubbornness in him that decided to try to prolong the inevitable. Upon realizing this his father took a deep breath and closed his eyes, becoming deathly still.

The room was so silent one could hear a pin drop, and Kaito hardly dared to breathe. He strained his muscles to balance although his heart was pounding so loudly in his ears that he was certain his Father could hear it as well. His brothers glanced at each other in apprehension, but neither dared to disturb Kuroshi's focus as the time ticked on. Kaito's

muscles burned from holding his awkward position and his lungs screamed, eventually persuading him to dare to inhale the tiniest amount of oxygen.

Kuroshi's eyes flashed open. With breakneck speed he leapt into the air and kicked out his leg, foot colliding with the side of Kaito's head. The young chameleon cried out in pain as he hit the floor hard, scales flickering from the blow. His father was upon him in an instant, holding him to the ground with a cool anger in his eyes. Kaito bit his tongue to keep from whimpering, ears ringing and a headache pounding behind his eyes.

"Will you never learn?" Kuroshi's grip tightened, fingers digging into Kaito's skin and causing him to wince. "What it means to defy *me*?"

"I'm sorry?" Kaito tried, but they both knew it was far too late.

"Ketsu, Mugai, leave us. Your brother will return to you when we are done." He demanded, and both chameleons scrambled to their feet without needing further motivation. They hurried out of the room, Ketsu sneaking back a final, apologetic glance before he shut the door behind him.

Chapter End Notes

Whelp, I'm sure that Kaito won't internalize the perfectionism of his father at all, she said convincingly hehe ;)

See ya in the next chapter, and thanks for reading! ^^

Chapter 3: Success Begins In The Mind

Chapter Summary

“Ow!” Kaito winced as Yuki gently wrapped a bandage around his upper arm, covering the stinging cut from his father’s kunai. The teal chameleon glanced up apologetically.

”I am sorry, Kaito. The medicine will make it feel better, I promise.” She began to tie off the cloth. “And I need to make sure no infection gets in, so it has to be tight. Besides, you cannot let it show that it hurt you.” He grip tightened slightly. “A true ninja must *never* let others know that they have gotten through.”

Chapter Notes

Hey everyone, and welcome to another chapter of The Art of Espionage! I hope you enjoy! :D

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”Yes, I know.” Kaito looked down. “But I’m still gonna get pummeled in the Trial at the end of the week, aren’t I?”

”Now don’t say that.” Yuki gently told him, and he sighed.

”Right, I apologize. *I am going to be utterly obliterated in the Final Trial at the end of the week.*” He corrected, and Yuki gave him a look.

”You cannot speak like that.” Yuki gently tapped a finger against her temple. “Success begins in the mind. If you cannot see yourself as an overcomer than you will never be able to achieve victory in life.”

Kaito sighed, looking down. “I know, Yuki. I’m apologize.”

Yuki gently reached out to grab his chin and turn his head back to face her, golden eyes meeting deep blue ones. “You have no need to apologize, Kaito. You are still young and learning.”

”But Ketsu and Mugai are already far stronger than me!” Kaito protested, feeling an ache in his chest. It was true—both his brothers were healthy, strong chameleons for their age while Kaito was always playing catch up. Yuki had explained to him about how late hatchlings could occasionally have developmental issues but often grew into healthy adults, but it didn’t help his conscience. *This* was why they disposed of eggs that didn’t hatch on time.

He wasn’t supposed to exist, and he was only proving that to his family.

And soon to the entire Shinobi Clan when they saw him fail in the Final Trial, where he and his brothers would fight for dominance of the village and prove their strength and dedication —not only to their tribe but also to the art of ninjitsu.

”Kaito, listen to me.” Yuki told him firmly. “A ninja’s greatest strength lies not in his body, but in his mind. Where muscle and litheness will fail you, your spirit will remain strong and fierce in times of hardship.”

”Yeah, but a strong body seems like a pretty good advantage too.” Kaito grumbled. “What good is a vibrant mind if Mugai breaks all of my bones?”

”And what good is a body if your spirit is broken?” Yuki challenged. “I’m sure you will find that the former is to be preferred. It might not seem like that now, but it is the truth.”

Kaito shrugged, and Yuki shook her head before continuing to bandage him in silence. He could understand where she was coming from, but *she* couldn’t understand the amount of pressure he was under. He had expectations! A clan of trained ninjas watching his every move and looking up to him as their potential leader! One small step and he would let them all down and prove that he was never worth hatching in the first place.

This… this was all he was.

The clan was everything.

Nothing before it and nothing to come after it.

He and his fellow chameleons were born to serve the clan and then die to make way for new warriors to be raised. It was the way of life, and who was he to wish for anything else?

Still… he had to wonder if there was something else out there beyond the sea and sky, a horizon that lit up with fire at sunset and whispered promises of hope and something more to life. He would often go to the cliff’s edge with Yuki to meditate, watching the light fade and the darkness creep in.

He liked the darkness.

It was a time when everyone else was asleep and it seemed as though he had the whole *world* to himself, if only for a moment until Yuki decided that it was time for him to rest. But when

he looked up at the multitude of stars he felt so… small. Not in an intimidating way, such as when his father looked at him, but as if he were merely living in a small corner of a great world with endless possibilities just waiting to be explored. There was no one to yell at him, no one to punish him… just gentle moonlight and strong, old trees that Kaito was certain had to be ages old. They simply remained firm and steadfast through all the seasons and storms that came upon them, and Kaito often supposed that it was a peaceful life to be a tree. Of course he never brought up his musings to his family, but it gave him some semblance of comfort to wonder about life and all that it could offer if he ever had the opportunity to become more than just the disappointment he knew he was.

”Kai!” Ketsu burst into the room, causing both chameleons to turn and look at him. Ketsu shifted his weight nervously, eyeing the bandages and bruising along Kaito’s body. “I… I apologize for calling your name like that. It was reckless and you would’ve just gotten knocked down instead of in this much trouble had I not…”

”It’s okay.” Kaito told him, looking down. “Father was right. It was my own fault.”

”But it wasn’t!” Ketsu protested. “Not entirely at least!”

”It was. I should’ve been more focused, and I can’t always depend on you to bail me out. He was only trying to prepare me for real life.” He glanced back up at his brother. “…But I appreciate you trying, anyway, even if Mugai will probably show us both up once we turn ten.”

”I understand that you two will have to fight against each other in the Trial, but mercy and aiding those you care about is not always a weakness. In fact, loyalty and companionship can be one’s greatest strength, as a threefold cord is not easily broken.” Yuki commented, and both chameleons looked over at her. She smiled gently. “Just because Mugai is stronger does not mean that he is by default the best leader. The head of the clan must be fierce, yet calm. Strong, yet gentle. Swift, yet observant.”

”So Mugai is halfway there.” Ketsu mumbled to Kaito, who snorted in amusement. Yuki hid a smile.

”I’m sure that you both will do wonderfully in the Trial, and know that they are not just observing who dominates the fight.” Yuki commented vaguely. “They will not simply be judging based on *who* wins, but *how* they win.”

”Yeah, it’ll really be fun for our ghosts to watch them debate all that.” Ketsu sighed. “Hey Kai, wanna spar a bit later? It might help get your mind off things, and I’m sure Father will be pleased to see it.”

”Thanks, but I think I’m going to go meditate for a bit.” Kaito hopped off his cot, bowing slightly to Yuki. “I am indebted to you, Yuki. I appreciate your assistance.”

Yuki shook her head fondly at his formal expression of gratitude. She stood as well, smoothing out her kimono and bowing her head in acknowledgement. “Of course, Kaito. Go rest your mind for a bit and enjoy yourself. I’ll call you when it’s time for dinner…” She

hesitated at Kaito's look, sighing. "Of course Kuroshi wouldn't allow you supper. I'll call you when it's time for bed then."

Kaito nodded, hurrying off towards the door. Of course hunger would irritate him but it'd be less noticeable if he was doing something he loved.

He would know.

Mugai scowled as he threw another shuriken, watching it sink into the soft bark of the tree with a satisfying *thwack*. He let fly another, and then another, determination surging through his bones as he forced himself to train harder.

He was *going* to win the Trial.

He had to.

His brothers were simple minded and weak, but he could imagine the greatness their clan could achieve if only they would use their training for conquering instead of merely defending. He was no stranger to their creed that ninjas are 'born in the darkness to live in the darkness', practitioners of their art believing that preserving peace of mind and refusing to engage in the trivial busyness of the world was to be valued over glory and fame, but what good was being a great ninja if no one knew except yourself? He couldn't understand why anyone would choose that fabled 'inner peace' over making a mark in the world, and he would be the leader to finally make a change and lead a charge to make his name feared in all of Mobius.

The clan wanted peace? Then he would make everyone terrified to cross his path.

He would not die feeling this weak.

"You only shame yourself with your temper, Mugai."

"You failed again. You bring dishonor upon us all with your imperfection."

"You are restrained by your physical limits, my son. The only way one can extend those limits is through the strengthening of their mind."

Mugai bristled at the thoughts of his father's harsh admonitions, harshly throwing a few more shurikens. He'd seen firsthand what strength can do! In all their spars he would easily overpower Kaito, who supposedly had 'the clearest mind'. His mind was empty if anyone asked Mugai, and he needed to focus. Ketsu was more of a challenge, physically and mentally capable, but he spent far too much time perfecting his techniques instead of giving the fight everything he had. He argued that sparring was for honing your skills, but Mugai preferred to win.

All he wanted was his father's approval, but if he couldn't achieve that then the second best thing was to prove that his way was superior.

He *was* going to win.

No matter what.

“Mugai!” Called out a casual voice, and the ninja whipped around with a weapon raised on instinct. A chuckle echoed from the shadows before an older ninja with scales the color of the dark bark of the trees around them stepped out, raising his hands to show he was unarmed. “Your technique is improving.”

”You think so?” Mugai turned to nod approvingly at the proof of his aim. “It’s bold of you to come so close to the village, Riku. You know what will happen if Father catches you anywhere near here after your banishment.”

”Please, we’ve been training together far too long for such formalities.” The chameleon chuckled. “Call me Uncle.”

Chapter End Notes

Whelp, looks like Mugai isn’t alone…

Thank you for reading, and see ya in the next chapter! :D

Chapter 4: Sweet Authority

Chapter Summary

Kaito took a deep breath, staring out over the sea and swinging his legs comfortably as he sat on the cliff's edge. He made sure to keep his gaze above the jagged rocks below him where his egg was almost shattered to his demise, trying not to think about how many hatchlings' lives had ended before they could truly begin. He thought it an awful thing that those young chameleons might've been ready to hatch and meet the world, but just because they took a bit too long they had that opportunity ripped from them.

Chapter Notes

Hey everyone, and welcome to a new chapter! :D

I hope you enjoy, and as always comments and kudos are greatly appreciated <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Kaito took a deep breath, staring out over the sea and swinging his legs comfortably as he sat on the cliff's edge. He made sure to keep his gaze above the jagged rocks below him where his egg was almost shattered to his demise, trying not to think about how many hatchlings' lives had ended before they could truly begin. He thought it an awful thing that those young chameleons might've been ready to hatch and meet the world, but just because they took a bit too long they had that opportunity ripped from them.

He lifted his eyes to the large silver moon that watched over the night, it's starry friends twinkling in companionship as they strove to offer what little light they could to the darkness. Kaito's tail swayed as he thought about it, the imagery making his heart warm with pleasure. There was such beauty all around them and it was strange how much he could get caught up in training and worrying over disappointing his clan when in reality it was all a small pebble on the mountain of life. Their village was so quaint while Mobius was so big… why were they not allowed to go out and explore the world they lived in? Kaito knew that it was dangerous out there, but they were trained ninjas! Why could they not go experience all life had to offer?

Everything was about their clan. They were born into the clan, lived to serve the clan and then died to make way for new clan members. They were told that it was a great purpose, but in the end what did it profit anyone? So their small village survived, but the world was so much bigger than themselves. What was their impact on the greater picture?

And why was it so forbidden to leave?

If it was for their own safety, then shouldn't they be the ones to choose to take the risk? So why were they stuck there?

Kaito let out a sigh, closing his eyes and feeling a light breeze whisper past his face with a pleasant chill. He'd turn ten years old at the end of the week, and it was tradition for the Final Trial to take place then. Everyone would be watching him fail that day, so what was he even still doing here? He knew he'd be dishonored for the rest of his life! Maybe he'd be able to find a lower place in the clan, but he'd never be able to go anywhere without those looks of disappointment following him. He'd never escape the whispers of the village gossips who chittered among each other that they had always known he wouldn't make it. He was a late hatcher, he was far too clumsy with his scrawny body and oversized feet, he never compared to either of his brothers in combat, and he always preferred the company of the moon and stars instead of his fellow ninjas.

He thought too much and trained too little.

He was a coward who ran away from punishments he deserved.

"Kaito?" Came Yuki's soft voice, but the young chameleon still immediately scrambled to his feet and into a defensive stance anyway out of habit from other times when he'd been interrupted daydreaming. Yuki's eyes softened and she raised her hands in a calming gesture. "It's okay, it's just me. It's time for you to get some sleep."

Kaito's heart dropped. "Now? But… but it's…"

"Darker than Kuroshi's scales out here. The sun has gone to bed, and now so must we." Yuki's eyes softened as she saw him look back at the moon. "What have you been mediating on?"

Kaito bowed his head. "Nothing, Yuki. Just… could we stay out here for a few more minutes? Please?"

Yuki hesitated before nodding. "No more than five minutes, Kai. Please do not argue with me on this."

"I won't." Kaito sat back down on the cliff's edge, staring up at that large moon watching over the world with it's gentle light. Yuki joined him and followed his gaze.

"Darkness is one of a ninja's greatest strengths." She commented softly, and he glanced over at her. "We move in the shadows, unseen and unheard. It covers our intentions so that we may keep to ourselves, seeking peace rather than glory. It is a time where the world is silent, as if nature itself is finally taking the opportunity to breathe and renew."

Kaito smiled slightly, knowing that Yuki shared his appreciation for flowery words and phrasing. He nodded along, and she nudged his shoulder with her own. "You are not the only one still learning, Kaito. Your brothers might exceed you in physical training, but they have a

long way to go in terms of learning to clear their minds. It is easier to train and strengthen your body than to learn true inner serenity."

"I don't know if that's true, Yuki." Kaito murmured. "I need to focus in my training more."

"In times of hardships, a true leader must be able to keep his mind clear and plan a course of action. What good is strength if you have no—"

"Yuki, I understand that you are trying to encourage me but I ask that you refrain from such flattery." Kaito told her firmly, and she sighed.

"I am not trying to flatter you, Kaito. I am only trying to ensure that you do not lose yourself in the clan's harsh expectations of you." She looked back at the moon, and Kaito fell silent. "I do not think that you understand what it truly means to be a ninja, and I think the rest of the clan have lost sight of it as well. They equate strength and brute force with worth. They have lost sight of compassion and inner peace. I do not want you to follow down that path, Kaito, and it seems as if you are the only heir self-aware enough to see that there might be a better way."

Kaito glanced over at Yuki's solemn face, well aware that her mother had been banished. She had become crippled after their village had been attacked, and although she had fought bravely she no longer had been able to fight like she once had. Refusing to be pushed any further she accepted banishment, but Kaito was certain that Yuki had to miss her. Their clan had been built upon the noble principles of ninjitsu but over time it seemed as though their morals had blurred.

But who was he to argue?

"Thank you, Yuki, and my apologies for talking back." He murmured. "It's probably time to head back anyway."

Yuki opened her mouth as if to say something else but changed her mind, nodding and standing up. "Of course… let's go. You have more training in the morning."

Kaito could wait.

"Good balance could be the the very factor that wins or loses a fight." Kuroshi told his sons as they each perched upon a bō staff, muscles taut with the concentration of not falling off their weapon. "If you fall, it will grant you to rise quickly. If you trip, it will aid you in remaining silent."

Mugai could feel little beads of sweat dripping down his face as he eyed the fourth staff gripped in his father's hand. Kaito and himself already had bruising welts from where they had even stricken after they had fallen down, and Ketsu was putting every ounce of his balance to good use so as not to be the next victim. Kuroshi watched them with an intense eye, and Mugai bristled slightly. This entire exercise was so stupid! Balance on a bō? When would that ever come into practical use? He became more frustrated as he got back onto his bō for the seventh time, further agitated with each fall which only disrupted his balance

further. “Mugai, clear your mind. You cannot allow past failures to hinder future success.” He heard his father tell him, always so high and mighty. Mugai took a deep breath, knowing that he only needed to reign in his temper until the Final Trial where he would be named the leader of their clan.

”Yes, Father.” He gritted out, green scales darkening as his anger simmered just beneath the surface. His staff began to wobble, and Mugai’s muscles tensed as his tail extended as a desperate counterbalance. Kuroshi ceased his pacing to watch, raising an eye ridge as his eldest son toppled to the floor again with a scowl.

Crack!

All three brothers flinched at the sound of their father’s bō against Mugai’s leg, the latter buckling to the ground but clenching his jaw and refusing to cry out. He kept his head bowed, fire erupting from the new wound as his anger helped to dull the pain.

For someone who preached peace among their clan he certainly beat his sons rather often. It extended beyond punishment for wrongdoings and seemed excessive in Mugai’s eyes.

He fleetingly wondered how his father would look if their roles were reversed, bruised and bowing before his son.

Kuroshi was silent a moment before he nodded. “You may stand.” As Mugai did, the elder’s expression darkened. “Your pride hinders you, Mugai. It clouds your vision and prevents you from moving forward.”

”Apologies, Father.” Mugai replied cooly, tail flicking in irritation although he struggled to keep his facial expression stoic. “However if balance helps you get back up, then I promise you that I will not get knocked down.”

Although Mugai thought that phrase indicated strength and a warrior’s spirit, it only seemed to irk his father further. Big surprise. “There is a difference between confidence and foolishness, my son, and no ninja can guarantee the outcome of a fight.” Kuroshi sighed, waving his hand. “You are dismissed for today.”

”*Hai.*” Came three replies, two relieved and one resentful. The chameleons made their way out of the dojo to find their mother Dokura waiting for them with Yuki. They immediately bowed to their mother, who nodded in acknowledgement.

”I am here to discuss the ceremony with you three.” She said simply, beckoning for them to follow her as she spoke. “I do believe that you know the basics of the Trial?”

”Yes Mother, it will take place in the arena in the middle of the village.” Ketsu offered, and Mugai fought the urge to roll his eyes. His brother could be such a sensei’s pet sometimes. “We will fight until the other two surrender or are incapable of getting back up.”

”That is true, Ketsu, but I do hope that you know about the prior traditions as well.” Dokura told them as they made their way to the kitchen. “Yuki, please make us some tea. Children, sit down at the table and pay attention.”

Yuki bowed and hurried to the stove while Dokura sat down, the brothers ensuring that their mother was comfortable before taking their own seats. The crimson scales of their mother became a bit more vibrant with pride as she looked upon her sons, and Mugai straightened slightly at the feeling. His mother certainly believed in him more than his father and praised his potential, less of a stickler and more understanding of the fire within Mugai. She finally nodded and spoke again. “Before the Trial it is customary for you three to be isolated. You all must meditate and renew your minds for the challenge, understanding that you soon will not be brothers, but opponents. As much as you may care for each other as members of this tribe, loyalty will not be a factor in this fight.”

”Mother, if I may ask…” Ketsu began, but a look from Dokura made him duck his head and apologize for interrupting. Mugai felt a twinge of smug satisfaction.

”Alliances can be one’s greatest strength,” Dokura’s eyes sharpened. “But it can also be a weakness. A ninja must refrain from sentimentality, whether it be to a person, place or item. Such fond feelings may hinder our judgement if a friend one day turns into an enemy and we are forced to be at odds. This trial will show our clan that you are willing to put your emotions aside for their sake.”

”I understand, Mother.” Mugai told her, a determined glint in his eyes. “The safety of well-being of this clan is my highest priority. I will make you proud.”

Dokura tilted her head. “Mugai, a ninja must never base their morals or motivations on other’s approval. We thrive because we understand how life flows smoothly when we all work together for the common goal of peace for our village, not because we are trying to rise to power or praise.”

”My apologies, I misspoke. I only meant that I will do everything I can to make certain that our great clan has the right leader.” Mugai corrected himself, and he didn’t miss how Ketsu and Kaito shared a look. Dokura nodded.

”As you all should. Fight bravely, and may the best leader prevail. Thank you, Yuki.” She commented as the teal chameleon set down cups in front of them and a beautiful teapot in the center of the table on a cloth. “As I was explaining, you three will have to keep a vigil in separate rooms prior to the Trial. Yuki will gather you all once it is time, but remember that there must be no talking among you. You must be entirely present in mind and body, and speaking will only unnecessarily distract you.”

“A vigil? Before the fight?” Ketsu asked carefully. “So we won’t sleep before the most important day of our lives?”

”Are you scared?” Mugai teased under his breath, loud enough for Ketsu to hear but quiet enough that Dokura either didn’t catch on or didn’t care. Ketsu shot him a glare, and Kaito looked down at his cup as Mugai returned Ketsu’s gaze.

”Correct. The clan needs to see how you all act when pushed to your limits.” Dokura nodded. “Your father went through this with his own siblings and prevailed.”

”But we never hear of Father’s kin.” Mugai slowly hinted, thinking back to his encounters with Riku, and Dokura’s eyes sharpened.

”They refused to let go of their pride.” She told them. “Your father was forced to banish them for disrespect. Let that be a lesson to you three—even if you lose you will need to exercise the art of humility and honor. You all grew up with each other, but one of you will inevitably rise to leadership of the clan and the other two will need to respect them as such, whether you agree or disagree with their decisions. Am I clear?”

There it was. That sweet authority to finally be rid of those who disrespected you. They all nodded and finished their tea in silence, but Mugai’s mind was buzzing with anticipation.

He would prove to them all he wasn’t weak.

And his father would see who was truly the stronger between them both.

”Eh, your father was always strict about those stupid rules.” Riku would shrug, twirling a kunai deftly between his fingers. *”You know that clan’s all about power anyways.”*

”*What do you mean?”* Mugai had asked in confusion, trying to copy his uncle and failing until Riku chuckled and helped him learn the finger placements on the blade. Yet another thing that Kuroshi would never do—help without judgement or a lecture.

”It’s all ridiculous. The leaders force their subordinates to train hard and obey them without question just to live their lives without ever setting foot outside this tiny village. There’s an entire world out there to explore and conquer, and you think you get what you want just by letting others boss you around?” Riku scoffed, pausing and looking Mugai dead in the eyes. *”Not a chance. You want other people to respect you? To give you what you want in life? Then you have to go out and* take *it. Heck, if I hadn’t’ve been banished then I probably just would’ve left! But you have a big opportunity here, don’t you? You don’t have to be Kuroshi’s pawn forever—you can win that Final Trial and then change the old ways of the clan. I can help you, too! What do you say?”*

Mugai hadn’t been sure at the time, but with every beating he received from his father over some small mistake the more his resolve grew.

Maybe Riku wasn’t the villain the clan made everyone believe he was.

He was just the only one brave enough to see a different way.

Chapter End Notes

Whelp it looks like Mugai’s making plans… and hopefully Kaito and Ketsu will be okay!

Thanks for reading, and see ya in the next chapter! :D

Chapter 5: Never React

Chapter Summary

Ketsu stared at the ceiling, unable to sleep from the anxiety of knowing the Trial was the day after tomorrow. He knew he should really mediate if he was unable to rest so that the time wouldn't be wasted, but no one was watching and he was allowing his mind to wander.

Chapter Notes

Hey everyone, and welcome to a new chapter of The Art of Espionage! I hope you enjoy! :D

As always comments and kudos are greatly appreaciated <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Ketsu stared at the ceiling, unable to sleep from the anxiety of knowing the Trial was the day after tomorrow. He knew he should really mediate if he was unable to rest so that the time wouldn't be wasted, but no one was watching and he was allowing his mind to wander.

This would be his last night before their vigil, and he needed to let go of any lingering worries about the future. As Yuki would tell them, worrying about the future was only a waste of energy when one should focus on the trials at hand. Perhaps your anxieties would never come to pass, and if they did then it would be too late to worry and only time for action. He would perform at his best during the Final Trial and hope that fate would lead the elders of their clan to make the right decision. He truly loved their village and the principles of ninjitsu, but one thing that he could never agree with was the way they shunned the weak. Wouldn't it be more honorable to lift up those who couldn't fight for themselves? To be loyal to familial ties rather than base worth upon how much they could serve?

Wouldn't that help them achieve inner peace without the stoic numbness it took to avoid sentimentality?

Another wave of anxiety hit him as he imagined having to face off against Mugai, who wouldn't take to losing easily. He would likely win due to his strength, but Ketsu knew the look in his eyes when he was about to snap. What would happen if the elders disqualified him due to his temper? Or if he injured one of his brothers dishonorably? This Trial was also about dignity and not savagely attacking those who opposed you. He could snap Kaito's bones in half if he wanted to…

No. He couldn't think about that. He just needed to stop worrying about everything and go to sleep.

"A ninja must never react. Never show weakness." Kuroshi took up one of his kunai and grabbed Ketsu's wrist. His brothers had already gone through such training, and both were staring at the wall and disassociating to keep from whimpering. He could hear Mugai's harsh breaths and Kaito's hard swallows and had dreaded his turn, but now it was here.

"Never react." His father said again, meeting Ketsu eyes. "A ninja must uphold their dignity and stoicism at all times, lest their enemy uses that weakness against them. Be wary—every small imperfection can and will be used against you. If you cannot control your own emotions, how are you supposed to lead our clan?"

With that he lowered his kunai to cut into Ketsu's arm, slowly dragging it through the skin and leaving a trail of fiery pain in it's wake. Ketsu almost stopped breathing at the sensation, eyes growing distant as he bit his tongue and stared straight ahead. Kuroshi nodded in approval. "Adequate, Ketsu. I can hear the changes in your breathing and see the adjustments in your expression, but you will learn to control that in time."

Kestu was jolted from his thoughts by a soft whimper, head snapping over towards Kaito's cot, where his younger brother was tossing and turning in his sleep. Ketsu's brow creased in concern but he refrained from going over, not wanting to embarrass the young chameleon.

Never react.

They were about to be opponents in a challenge, and were no longer young hatchlings. Kaito could take care of himself and there was no need to go over and—

Kaito sat up in bed abruptly, eyes wide and breathing hitched. He remained completely silent, old training showing through even in his half-awake state as he refused to wake up his siblings, unaware that one was already awake.

"Kaito?"

Kaito flinched away at the soft whisper, his nightmare already putting his nervous system into high alert. Ketsu finally got out of bed, brotherly instincts winning over as he walked over to the youngest chameleon. "Kaito? Are you okay? Your bedsheets are soaked…"

Kaito shook his head, and Ketsu frowned. "A nightmare, perhaps?"

Kaito hesitated, and Ketsu sighed, sitting down next to his younger brother on the bed. Kaito watched him a moment, still trembling but Ketsu could tell he was grateful for the company even if he'd never had the courage to admit it. The youngest finally spoke up. "…My apologies for waking you up, Ketsu."

Ketsu sighed. "You didn't wake me up. I couldn't sleep."

Kaito tilted his head. "Why not, if I might ask?"

Ketsu looked down. "No important reason. Just… the Trial is almost here."

It was stated as a fact, but both of them knew what he was implying. ”Do you need assistance in falling back asleep?” Ketsu asked slowly, hating how small Kaito looked in that moment. They both maintained their composure, but by the look in their eyes they both could sense the unspoken reality that neither of them wanted to be alone right now. Kaito slowly nodded, almost trembling as he fought back the lingering emotions from is nightmare. Ketsu’s eyes softened and he scooped up his younger brother into his arms. “Don’t worry, Kai. I won’t tell anyone if you don’t. Besides, your sheets are damp and surely uncomfortable, and I don’t mind the company. It’s cold tonight.”

Kaito finally gave in, nodding desperately and clinging to his brother a bit more comfortably. Ketsu hid a smile as he brought them both over to his own bed and set Kaito in first before crawling under the covers himself. Ketsu could feel Kaito’s tense muscles slowly relax in his brothers embrace, letting his eyes close and taking a deep, content sigh. Ketsu also calmed, holding his brother protectively and comfortably.

They were both asleep in minutes.

”Are you two *serious*?”

Both chameleons jolted awake at the sudden judgmental voice, and Kaito’s eyes opened to see Mugai standing next to them with a look of disapproval. “We’re not hatchlings anymore! How are you supposed to keep a vigil if you can’t even sleep apart?”

”You know we have separate beds, Mugai.” Ketsu protested, sitting up with a yawn. “Gaia, you don’t have to be cross about it.”

”Well I think it’s childish to still have to cuddle with your siblings when you have a hard night when you’re almost ten years old. We’re ninjas, and about to take the Final Trial at that!” Mugai raised an eye ridge. “What would Father say?”

”Oh just be quiet.” Ketsu snipped, getting out of bed and shivering. “It’s so cold… is the sun even out yet?”

”I thought we should all get up early to show initiative.” Mugai explained. “But apparently that wasn’t a universally acknowledged understanding between us. We’re adults today, if you have forgotten. Father has already been up for hours!”

”That’s because he never sleeps long to watch over the village!” Ketsu protested.

”And if I’m going to succeed him then I should start practicing now.” Mugai turned away, and Kaito looked down. “Come on—I’m sure that Mother would like to remind of use what preparations lie in store for the day and when the vigil starts.”

”My apologies, Ketsu.” Kaito mumbled when Mugai left the room. “I had no intentions of shaming you in Mugai’s eyes.”

”It’s okay, and it wasn’t your fault.” Ketsu hesitated. “You know, I may or may not have certain regretful emotions when we are no longer as close after the Trial. It was pleasant to

have a good night's sleep, and to commemorate childhood one final time."

Kaito blinked. Did Ketsu seriously just admit that he was going to miss sharing a room? Out loud? But they weren't supposed to…

"Come *on*, you two!" Came Mugai's impatient call, and Kaito lowered his voice to a whisper.

"I'll… share similar sentiments. Now let's go."

The day seemed to pass in a blur. They had a few final training sessions and a long time of meditating and before they knew it it was time to begin their vigil.

"Here you are, Kaito." Yuki told him as she led him to his room. Kaito looked up at her. "You will remain here until I come to gather you. Use this time to mediate, and remember—no speaking."

Kaito simply nodded, and she smiled. "Good. I'll be taking my leave now, but I do wish you the best of fortune in the Trial tomorrow. May the worthy leader prevail among you three."

She finally left after that, leaving Kaito alone with this thoughts. He sat down crisscrossed on the mat in the middle of the room, taking a deep breath and closing his eyes. He needed to focus, to clear his mind and subdue his pride.

What was it that Yuki had told them? That they will not only be judged on who wins, but how that chameleon wins? That at least gave Ketsu a shot. Mugai would still likely win the fight with his strength, but who knew what honor he would maintain? He had seen it himself in training sessions—the moment his brother would *snap* and attack blindly out of anger. What if that happened in the Final Trial? Kaito shuddered, wondering how the humiliation of losing his temper might affect his brother's attacks.

"A true ninja never shows emotion." His father's words came back to him and he closed his eyes, shoving aside his worries about Mugai.

"A true ninja never cries."

"A true ninja never settles for anything less than perfection."

"A true ninja never breaks down."

"A true ninja would rather live alone than to not pull his weight in a clan."

"A true ninja would throw themself off a cliff in an instant if their leader told them to."

"A true ninja is self-sufficient and never needs to ask for help. To do so is a sign of weakness."

The phrases ran through Kaito's mind as he meditated, taking slow breaths and trying to commit them to his memory as undeniable truths. He knew that in order for any wise advice to take effect, he needed to believe them with every fiber of his being.

He needed to prove that he was worth existing.

Chapter End Notes

Looks like the Final Trial is almost here! I wonder what will happen… ;)

Thanks for reading, and see ya in the next chapter! :D

Chapter 6: The Final Trial

Chapter Summary

Kaito stood perfectly still in the arena, a steep gorge filled with thick foliage where the rest of the clan could observe from the cliffs surrounding them. It wasn't quite dawn yet, the world still mysterious and dark just as it should be. A small glow was beginning to peek over the mountains, and the fight should be over before the sun rose on their new leader. He and his brothers were standing in the only meadow, waiting for the challenge to begin and clad in the uniform of Shinobi warriors for the first time with black shozokus and matching masks that covered the majority of their faces, leaving only their yellow horns visible. The fabric was of a rare material that would vanish with the chameleon, and losing it was as dishonorable as losing one's weapons.

Chapter Notes

Hey everyone, and welcome to a new chapter! Things are really spicing up in the next few chapters, so buckle up lol! >:D

As always comments and kudos are greatly appreciated, and I hope you enjoy! ^^

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Kaito stood perfectly still in the arena, a steep gorge filled with thick foliage where the rest of the clan could observe from the cliffs surrounding them. It wasn't quite dawn yet, the world still mysterious and dark just as it should be. A small glow was beginning to peek over the mountains, and the fight should be over before the sun rose on their new leader. He and his brothers were standing in the only meadow, waiting for the challenge to begin and clad in the uniform of Shinobi warriors for the first time with black shozokus and matching masks that covered the majority of their faces, leaving only their yellow horns visible. The fabric was of a rare material that would vanish with the chameleon, and losing it was as dishonorable as losing one's weapons.

Each of the brothers had carefully blank expressions, revealing nothing about their innermost thoughts save for a certain look in their eyes, such as the fierce determination in Mugai's and the stoic resolve in Ketsu's. Kaito did his best to keep his face expressionless despite the anxiety churning in his stomach.

"Begin!" Their father's voice rang out and all three brothers immediately turned invisible, Kaito turning on his heel and hurrying into the trees. If he could find a good hiding place then

perhaps he could have a better vantage point to drop on one of his brothers. Brute strength had never been his fortitude, so luring Mugai into the woods was likely his best option.

This is it. No mistakes. He mentally repeated to himself as he stealthily avoided the twigs and dried leaves littering the ground. It was difficult to do with his large feet and he was noticeably slowed down but still he persevered and finally stopped at the base of a large tree, looking up and nodding. He silently scaled the bark, wishing he had his shinobi shuko to aid his climbing. However, as they were only meant to display their natural skill in hand to hand combat, there were no weapons permitted.

His scales blended seamlessly into his surroundings as he perched on a limb, scanning the surrounding area for his brothers. Tail extended for balance, he continued making his way along the branch before silently leaping to the next tree and scanning around himself once again.

Everything was so silent, but whereas quiet had been his sanctuary now it was thick with tension. His brothers could be hiding anywhere, just waiting to attack! Besides that, the entire village would be watching him fail and would finally be proven right that he should never have existed in the first place. The best he could do was put up a good fight and hopefully they would deem him strong enough to at least be one of their warriors instead of dishonorable banishment.

He suddenly froze, a strange creeping feeling making his tail curl and his mind snap back to attention. What was going on? Every nerve was on high alert, warning almost blending into the breeze around him. He glanced behind himself with bated breath to see only foliage there, heart pounding heavily in his chest. He remained perfectly still for a long moment, listening carefully for any sign of why his intuition was screaming at him.

Thwish.

It was the smallest of sounds, almost able to be mistaken as the rustling of the leaves. But on instinct Kaito leapt to the side, barely managing to cling to another branch as he fell. He hoisted himself back up, eyes wide and alert as he glanced behind him to see a shuriken sheathed into the bark of where he had previously been perched, heart dropping down to his stomach. Weapons weren't permitted in this Trial! Where had it even come from? Kaito squinted at the dull silver object, observing the nicks and scuffs in the metal from wear. Kuroshi would never allow such an old shuriken to remain in their collection, so where—

"Kuroshi trained you well—I've hardly seen such intuition even in Shinobi's mature warriors." Came a deep voice from behind him, and Kaito nearly jumped out of his skin, the shock turning him visible again. He gasped as he scrambled to regain his hold, but before he could fall he felt strong arms envelop him and pin him back onto the branch, an invisible hand going over his mouth. A dark brown chameleon flickered into view, peering at Kaito with a strange glint in his eyes. He smirked. "You must be Kaito. Mugai wasn't kidding about your size, was he? You're the smallest ten-year-old I've ever seen!"

Kaito squirmed slightly and struggled to get his scales to vanish again, the older chameleon chuckling. "Now now don't be shy! I know this isn't much of a family reunion, but you don't have to worry. Just do as I say and I won't have to hurt you."

What on earth was going on? Kaito wriggled again in his captor's strong grip, but he suddenly turned invisible and dragged Kaito further into the shadows of the tree. "Shhhhh… looks like we have company."

He grabbed Kaito's chin and forced his head to the side so the younger chameleon could observe the forest below, at first seeing nothing but then noticing some of the stray twigs of the bushes move to the side unnaturally. He tensed up, realizing that one of his brothers must be there. He was about to renew his struggles when he felt something cold and sharp press up against his neck, his captor murmuring, "Easy now, no need to spoil the surprise."

Kaito's mind was racing. What was the stranger talking about? Was he going to hurt his brothers? Or… or try to attack the Clan or something? He could still feel the blade against his scales, but maybe if he turned the other way…

The young chameleon suddenly threw all of his strength in rolling to his right, feeling the branch beneath him tremble from the movement. The intruder hissed and reached for his falling captive, but Kaito kicked and scratched with all his might at the hand to keep it away. It latched tightly onto his tail, but Kaito heard a cracking sound as the branch gave way, sending them both toppling noisily to the ground. Ketsu flickered into view, looking bewildered at his brother scrambling away from an invisible threat. "…Kai…?"

"Go!" Kaito panicked, tripping over his own feet and face planting into the dried leaves on the ground. "Go go go!"

"What's going on?" Ketsu yelped as the intruder grabbed Kaito's leg and dragged him back, the yellow chameleon getting into a defensive position. "Is that Mugai?"

"There's an intruder! Go warn the others!" Kaito pleaded as the older chameleon came into view. He looked down in disappointment before back up at Ketsu.

"And I had so hoped that we'd be able to do this discreetly." He sighed. "But get the name right if you must—tell them that Riku has returned."

"Let go of my brother, you creep!" Ketsu snarled, only betrayed by a flicker of fear in his eyes. "*Father! Yuki! Somebody! We're under attack!*"

"Of course we're under attack! That's the point of the Trial, blockhead!" Came Mugai's voice from the foliage, and the dark green chameleon stalked out in irritation. "Now shut up before we're disqualif—" His eyes widened at the sight of Kaito being pinned down. "Riku?!"

"You know him?" Ketsu narrowed his eyes in accusation. "Care to explain yourself, Mugai?"

"Ah, my favorite nephew." Riku chuckled. "I told you I'd help you win."

"But I… I thought… but…" Mugai stumbled over his words. "But they've seen you! And stupid Ketsu is going to have the whole Clan in here at any moment! I'll be disqualified!"

"As you should be!" Ketsu snapped before glaring at Riku. "Now get off of Kaito! I don't know exactly who you are, but if you start running now then *maybe* you'll be able to outrun

the rest of the Shinobi before they get here!”

”Who said anything about running?” Riku raised an eye ridge. “I told you already, Mugai: good things never come to those who wait. If you want this then we have to act now.”

”Want what?” Ketsu demanded.

”Oh shut up, Ketsu!” Mugai snapped back. “Did you really think Father would let us have a fair fight? He already favors you anyway!”

”What are you even *talking* about?! It’s not just Father deciding—it’s the entire village! We’re supposed to fight honorably here!” Ketsu protested.

”Please! We both know that Father gets the final say!” Mugai scowled, and Riku nodded, pressing Kaito harder into the ground.

”Very true. Kuro wants someone to feed his own ego. Someone to replace him.” Riku commented. “Mugai was the only one brave enough to step outside of the village, but I’ll tell you what: if you both run away then Mugai will by default win and you won’t have to get hurt. How does that sound?”

”No!” Kaito squirmed under Riku’s grip, and Ketsu stepped forward as well.

”A true ninja would rather die with honor than flee without it.” He said firmly, and Riku rolled his eyes.

”Kuro’s words in your mouth, no doubt.” His eyes sharpened. “But that also could be arranged.”

”You both need to leave.” Mugai told them firmly. “He’s not joking about this.”

”Would you like further proof?” Riku asked cooly, and Kaito’s stomach dropped as the older chameleon withdrew a kunai from within the folds of his shozoku.

Ketsu’s eyes widened and he lunged forward. “No!”

The gold chameleon barreled into Riku, who was tackled off of Kaito. The purple ninja remained frozen for a few moments, reaching up to feel around the weird sting on his neck. His hand came back wet with crimson and he stiffened, realizing just how close Riku had been. Kaito whipped around to see Ketsu and Riku tussling, golden eyes sharpening as he leapt into the fight and dodged a swipe of his blade. Ketsu had already managed to snatch a kunai off of his supposed ‘uncle’, and all chameleons vanished into their surroundings as they fought. Kuroshi’s training spiraled through Kaito’s mind as he combatted Riku, the reality crashing down that this was no longer a training spar but his first real conflict. He dropped down and swung out his leg to take out one of his opponents, but he felt the air swish past as Riku leapt over his attack and he tripped Ketsu instead. He quickly rolled out of the way on intuition and saw a blade lodge into the ground where his leg had been moments before.

Someone suddenly crashed into him from behind and Kaito grunted as he hit the ground, training kicking in as he tucked his head and flung his attacker away. Based on the size and

sound of his gasp Kaito could tell it was Mugai, chest clenching as he got back into position and briefly closed his eyes to listen. This was the way of the ninja—combat through silence and intuition. He needed to keep his composure even when his brother was getting angrier and angrier. He heard a harsh rustling from his left and dodged as Mugai once again lunged at him, adjusting his balance before lashing out his tail to wrap around his brother's wrist and yank him off his footing. As Mugai stumbled Kaito leapt over to the other side and quickly struck to make him fully collapse. He backed up and nearly jumped out of his skin when he bumped into another invisible being, raising his hands defensively until he realized it was Ketsu.

"Have you seen Riku?" Ketsu demanded, keeping his back to Kaito's as the two scanned their surroundings.

"I thought you were fighting him! I was dealing with Mugai!" He hissed back, heart pounding in his chest.

"*I'm going to kill you two!*" Mugai roared furiously, and both chameleons tensed at the familiar tone. Kaito rolled to the side as Ketsu likewise dodged, Mugai blinding following the spot their voices had emitted from. Kaito tensed up as Ketsu thrust a kunai into his hand, ensuring that his brother gripped it before withdrawing his hand and hurrying away. Kaito squeezed the weapon in his fist, feeling the familiar weight with a strange bewilderment. He'd completely expected to be alone in the Trial—as they should be—but he was grateful that Ketsu had the sense to realize that this was no longer just a traditional custom to conclude a new leader but a very real fight that they needed to take seriously. Mugai however seemed to know their attacker, and although Kaito knew he shouldn't be surprised he still felt the cold sting of bitterness in his chest. Where was the honor in bringing in an outsider who was not bound by the laws of the Shinobi? Where was the satisfaction in aiding an enemy to their clan? And still he persisted even when Riku had made it clear that there was no place for them in his plans!

"Mugai, stop!" Kaito grit out as he dodged another attack from his brother, swiftly kicking his legs out from under him. "Where is Riku?"

"What does it even matter? We're going to win!" Mugai shouted back, grabbing Kaito's heel as he fell and taking the smaller chameleon down with him.

"You brought an enemy into the clan!" Ketsu hissed. "That's punishable by death and you know it! Gaia, what were you even thinking?!"

"I was *thinking* that none of it will matter when I'm the new leader!" Mugai yanked Kaito towards him and landed a few heavy punches before his brother managed to scramble away. "You can't be so dense as to not see that there's a better way for the Shinobi!"

"That's not my opinion to make!" Ketsu snapped. "My loyalty is to our Father, and then to whoever wins! It's just the way it is and I'm not about to lose my honor chasing some fantasy of what could be!"

"And that's what makes you weak! So just *stay out of my way*!" Mugai roared.

”Where even is Riku?” Kaito stumbled to his feet, ignoring the tremble in his limbs. “We’ve been arguing here while he’s on the loose!”

”Right, we need to protect the clan.” Ketsu agreed before Kaito heard the sharp *thwack* of Mugai landing a hit on his brother. “Are you insane Mugai?! Your anger is your weakness and it is blinding you to—”

”*I am not weak!*” Mugai all but screamed, “And shut up! Just shut up with all your high and mighty proverbs, okay? I’m not weak and I’m not giving up and you can either give up and leave now or face Uncle when he gets back!”

”Back from where?” Kaito began when shouts began to ring out from the village, causing all three brothers to flinch and turn around. There was an amber glow flickering from their home that wasn’t from the soon-to-come sunrise, and it made Kaito’s blood run cold.

”The village.” Ketsu mumbled in shock, watching the fire build. “He’s attacking the village.”

Chapter End Notes

Whoops, my finger slipped and now they’re being attacked and their village is on fire! What a tenth birthday celebration, am I right? Heh? Hehe…

See ya in the next chapter, and thanks for reading! ^^

Chapter 7: Get Up

Chapter Summary

> ”Why is he burning it?!” Kaito’s eyes grew round at the sight of the angry flames and billowing smoke. “Mugai what in chaos is this?”
>
> ”He… he didn’t say…” Mugai mumbled distractedly before shaking his head and glaring at his brothers. “It doesn’t matter! We need to get rid of the old in order to make way for the new.”

Chapter Notes

> Hey everyone, and welcome to a new chapter! Things are about to get pretty intense, hehe… :3
>
> ▶ TW spoilers below ^^
>
> I hope you enjoy! As always comments and kudos are greatly appreciated <333

See the end of the chapter for more notes

> ”Why is he burning it?!” Kaito’s eyes grew round at the sight of the angry flames and billowing smoke. “Mugai what in chaos is this?”
>
> ”He… he didn’t say…” Mugai mumbled distractedly before shaking his head and glaring at his brothers. “It doesn’t matter! We need to get rid of the old in order to make way for the new.”

> ”And you say that *I’m* speaking like Father!” Ketsu stepped forward, eyes blazing. “This is our home! You’re just saying that because Riku said it first!”
>
> ”He’s the only one who ever believed in me!” Mugai protested. “He’s teaching me to think independently!”
>
> ”He’s teaching you to be like *him*! He just wants leadership of the Shinobi Clan, how can you not see that?” Ketsu began before the sounds of crashing made them all flinch. “Just stay out of the way, Mugai! We need to stop Riku and can talk about this later.”
>
> ”There’s nothing to talk about!” Mugai sneered. “And it’s already too late to stop a fire that big, even a hatchling could realize that!”

”Well we have to try. A true ninja never gives up.” Ketsu turned with a determined glint in his eyes. “Come on, Kaito!”

Kaito nodded, shaking off his shock and trying to clear his mind. Yuki was still there! As was his mother Dokura… and the rest of the clan members… everyone he was supposed to protect…

”You’re not stopping him!” Mugai’s eyes narrowed and his tail flicked, causing both his brothers to look at him as if he’d gone crazy.

”Mugai, you have only one chance to explain yourself.” Ketsu told him in a low voice, scales darkening. “Why are you still so adamant on letting Riku destroy everything we know? I thought you wanted leadership of this village, but you know Father will banish you if not *kill* you for betraying him. It is the way of the Shinobi.”

Kaito stiffened, the pieces falling into place. He stumbled back, staring at his brother like a ghost that he didn’t even know. “Riku’s going to kill Father, isn’t he? That way you’d be the next in line to inherit the Clan.”

Mugai averted his eyes, and Ketsu stepped forward, tail lashing. “But that’s only after *us*. What, are you going to kill your own brothers as well?”

”Not if you both leave as Riku suggested.” Mugai muttered, and Kaito wished he couldn’t believe what he was hearing. He knew that logically they were raised as opponents and that true ninjas did not let sentimentality or blood ties hinder them, but still the reality was harsh. He had been raised with these chameleons—trained with them, meditated with them, hatched with them. Was he really so weak that he felt a sort of betrayal when Mugai was ready to move on? This was why his Father shunned him and the village knew he wouldn’t be a good leader: he was stuck in his head. Physically his brothers were simply other beings walking on Mobius, but mentally he was allowing fond memories to sway his resolve.

Golden eyes met dark chocolate ones as the brothers stared at each other, Kaito’s purple scales dulling slightly as he grappled with all that was happening. It was his tenth birthday today! The ritualistic time for the Trial they’d been training their entire life for! He hadn’t expected anything good to come out of the fight, but he’d also expected something more… certain. Something filled with a sense of closure for his season of training and filled with resolve for what was to come. An honest fight that ended in an honest outcome.

Not this strange new dystopia he’d been thrust into, where his own brother committed a treason punishable by death and his long-lost uncle was prepared to murder his father for power.

”Kaito, focus!” Ketsu shouted, and Kaito was shaken from his thoughts. “Leave Mugai, we need to do what we can to help the village! Come on!”

”Aww, look at you two buddying up!” Mugai mocked. “*’Oh look at us! We’re the perfect team!’* Relational and cooperative ties are nothing but anchors to those who hold you back. Why wait for others when you can do better alone? But then again you two were always weak and—“

”Bite your tongue!” Ketsu snapped. “Kai, ignore him and let’s go.”

”One of us can round up survivors while the other evacuates the village.” Kaito agreed. “Unless we both target Riku first to ensure he won’t do any more damage.”

”Like chaos you will!” Mugai snarled, eyes going almost manic. None of the three noticed the footsteps approaching—light and soft just as they should be.

”Mugai, we won’t let you finish this!” Ketsu exploded, and Mugai froze, looking between the two of his brothers with a strange expression. He was completely silent, and when his eyes met Kaito’s the purple chameleon got a strange feeling of dread in the pit of his stomach. Mugai’s eyes didn’t match the situation in the slightest, and whereas he had been angry and explosive before now he seemed cunning and almost bemused. The purple chameleon took a small step back, scales starting to vanish on instinct.

”What is going on here?” Came Kuroshi’s demand as the obsidian chameleon burst into the clearing, eyes furious. “Everyone in the village could hear your shouting, and besides that we are under attack! We need every ninja to—“

Suddenly Mugai let out a blood-curdling scream and lunged forward, everything moving so fast yet so sharp with detail that Kaito knew he would never forget anything about this moment. It would be imprinted in his mind forever—Mugai withdrawing a hidden kunai from within his shozoku, him lunging at his youngest brother with the weapon raised as Kaito for some reason couldn’t get his limbs to move an inch even though he was feeling almost dizzy with panic, Ketsu lunging forward to try to knock Mugai away…

And finally the yellow chameleon being jerked away by some invisible force and collapsing on the ground with a fresh wound in his back.

Kaito couldn’t breathe. Couldn’t think. The world had faded away and left him with only the sight of Ketsu’s wide, unseeing eyes as shock make his dying muscles tense up. Riku casually reappeared and yanked the blade away from the young chameleon’s body, shaking off some of the blood before holding it back up in a ready position. “Pity, I was hoping to finish you off first, Kuro, but it looks like your son was eager to cut the line.”

Kuroshi sniffed, eyes narrowing in realization. “Riku. So you are the one who set fire to my village and ruined the sacred ritual. I should’ve known.”

”Good to see you too, brother.” Riku smirked slightly. “It’s such a shame that your little puppet was killed—now you’re left with a weak late-hatcher and a bold ninja with a warrior spirit. The choice is clear.”

Kuroshi tensed up, gesturing to his brother’s blade, still dripping with blood. “A true ninja knows how to clean his own blade, Riku. A dirty weapon is a dishonor.”

Kaito stiffened. That was it? That was all his father could say? Kaito started forward but Riku raised his kunai. “Ah ah ah, easy there, little heir. Unless you want to join your kin.”

Get up. Kaito mentally pleaded as Ketsu's vibrant scales paled, chest no longer rising and falling with each breath. *A true ninja always gets up. That's what you always said, right? So get up.*

Get up.

Ketsu remained completely limp and still, Kaito's heart clenching in his chest. Mugai was likewise staring at his dead brother in shock, having expected this but reality hitting hard as death was no longer a vague idea but the grim aftermath of someone he had grown up with. Kaito's breath hitched and his vision grew blurry, grief mingling with shame as he couldn't hold back his emotions. He was sent crashing to the ground before he even knew what was happening, unable to resist Kuroshi's blow as he crumbled numbly. The obsidian chameleon glared at him, disgust clear in his expression. "Control yourself, Kaito. You are no longer a child, or have you forgotten?"

I'm sorry… Kaito thought, but for the life of him he couldn't get any words to form. Gaia, why was it so hard to regain his composure?

Never react.

Never react.

Never react.

Never—

Another strike from his father's whip-like tail snapped his head to the side, Kaito flinching back and curling up into a pathetic ball in a weak attempt to protect himself. Kuroshi hit him again, anger rising. "You are in the presence of an enemy, Kaito! You shame the entire clan with your emotions. Where is your honor? Where is your dignity? Ketsu is dead and there is nothing else to it."

"As I told you, Kuro." Riku commented as Kaito felt the tears escape, covering his head as he was kicked by his father. "Your sons are not fit to lead the great Shinobi Clan and you know it. Mugai is the only one with… *potential*."

"The only one foolish enough to be manipulated by you." Kuroshi replied coldly, and Mugai looked up with uncertain eyes. He was biting his tongue in an effort to keep stoic and calm as he lifted his chin.

"Kaito and… and Ketsu were always weak, Father." He stepped closer as Riku watched on, eyes dark and knowing. "I have been training harder than both of them combined."

"With Riku, I presume?" Kuroshi asked slowly, eyes narrowing. Kaito felt his chest clench in fear as Mugai hesitated before nodding.

"Yes, Father. And even if you disapprove, I am inevitably the heir now." Gaining confidence, he lifted his chin further to look at his father with bitter eyes. "I know the Trial was

interrupted by… unfortunate circumstances, but I am the only one of us capable of such a great responsibility. Look at Kaito! Do you really think *he* deserves the Clan over myself?“

Shut up shut up shut up… Kaito mentally pleaded, but of course his brother didn’t hear him and didn’t sense the building anger in his father. His voice raised as he adopted a more authoritative stance.

”As the new leader of this Clan I welcome Riku back in, since he was wrongfully banished.” Mugai’s eyes sharpened. “He helped train me into the warrior I always knew I could be, and look at the two *you* trained! You’re lucky if I don’t outcast *you*—“

Kuroshi moved before anyone could react, lunging forward and grabbing Mugai’s head with one hand and the base of his neck with the other. He quickly twisted, adding pressure as a sickening cracking rang out and Mugai let out a strangled gasp. Another whimper wracked Kaito’s body and he slapped a hand over his own mouth as Mugai collapsed next to Ketsu, twitching in pain and discomfort but unable to move as he was slowly strangled.

”Pity.” Riku glanced down at Mugai’s body. “Is that what you’ve resorted to, Kuro? Killing anyone who stands in your way?”

“I cannot let disrespect be tolerated. You know this.” Kuroshi’s eyes narrowed. “And you were the one who killed Ketsu out of cold blood.”

”*I* am not bound by the rules and customs of the Shinobi Clan.” Riku’s eyes turned to Kaito, who looked up at him warily. “However I know you are, and I also am well aware that this scrawny thing is your final heir. Which means that after his death the village will pass to me if you also die.”

After his death. Not if he died in battle, not if he died due to natural circumstances—just a grim certainty that he wouldn’t make it past today. Kaito felt a sharp, primal urge to survive cut through his grief as he mentally screamed at his own body to move. Kuroshi stiffened. “Kaito has shown weakness in the past, but he has a strong mind and will learn to be a good heir to the village.”

”Oh sure, just beat him into submission like your own father did.” Riku rolled his eyes.

”Don’t speak like that!” Kuroshi snapped, and Riku smirked.

”Oh, is the stoic leader of our clan finally breaking?” The dark brown chameleon’s scales glinted in exhilaration. “I can see all the bruises and cuts, and never missed an injury on Mugai when he came to train with me. You’ve become just as bad as Father and you know it, Kuro! I’m just putting your sons out of their misery.”

”If they cannot handle a little discipline then they are weak!” Kuroshi scowled.

”There is discipline, but there is also cruelty. Whatever happened to the Clan’s conduct of peace?” Riku snapped his fingers. “Oh wait—that was all a lie. Only a ruthless power play that feeds the leader’s ego. Not a bad situation if you’re the leader, but I’m the only one brave

enough to say it out loud. And I'll be on top once Kaito and yourself are out of the picture, so it's of no consequence to me."

"I won't let you murder my son!" Kuroshi growled, and Riku rolled his eyes.

"Oh, so now you suddenly care about this late-hatching runt because he's useful to you? Face it—you want someone weak who will *become* you, not succeed you." Riku scoffed.

"Riku…" Came Mugai's rasp, and the ninjas looked down to see a dazed, pained look in the dying chameleon's eyes. He couldn't quite move anymore but had adopted a primal, almost vulnerable expression as he came to terms with his nearing demise. "Riku… I…"

"Finish the job, Kaito." Kuroshi said in a low voice, and Kaito's mouth went dry. *What…?* "Did I stutter? Take that kunai you dropped and finish the Trial."

"Oh the stupid Trial!" Riku flung out his arms in exasperation. "Face it Kuro—he's the weakest of all of them! You just ruined your only hope at a decent heir, and now all you have is me."

"Kaito is capable of leading if he would only get out of his head and take action." Kuroshi glared at his youngest son. "Are you even listening to me? I told you finish the job, and that is a direct order from your leader. Your role is not to think upon the moral conflicts or the previous sentiments you may have had—you need only listen and obey. *I* am your conscience. *I* am your voice of reason. *I* am your thoughts. Do you understand me? So pick up your kunai. *Now!*"

Kaito flinched at his father's voice, shakily grabbing the kunai next to him and hesitating, feeling like he was an outsider in his own skin. His limbs were all tingling and trembling, feeling too weak to move even though his brain was commanding them to. Kuroshi stepped forward and Kaito instinctively flinched away, dropping the kunai again as he covered his head. "Kaito, you are not a child! Get up!"

"Such a fearless leader. The village is in good hands." Riku mocked, and shame began to pound in Kaito's head. What was he doing? His father told him to finish killing Mugai, and logically he knew that it was the proper punishment for such an act of treason. He was a ninja! A warrior! Someone who had been trained to fight and kill from birth. So why was this so hard? He curled up tighter as his father shouted something else trying to get himself to move. He peeked over to see his brother looking at him with pleading eyes, looking genuinely terrified for the first time in all their ten years. The bravado was gone now that he was helpless, and all that was left was a broken shell of a chameleon.

Mugai's mouth opened and closed but he was unable to get any words out, Kaito realizing after a few moments that he was trying to beg for mercy. From *him*. From the weakest brother he would always pick on for the thrill of his own ego. Ketsu was lying dead on the ground next to him and Kaito's eyes darted between the two brothers he could no longer recognize with a sinking sense of dread.

"Kaito, I will not ask again." Kuroshi told him firmly, and Kaito grimaced as he slowly unraveled himself, limbs feeling heavy as he picked up the kunai.

Never react.

He tediously got to his feet, the metal feeling slick in his sweaty palm.

Never react.

Kuroshi watched on, and Kaito could feel his eyes upon him as he approached Mugai, seeing the dread in his brother's face.

Never react.

He couldn't do it.

Never react.

But he had to.

Never react.

He needed to be strong.

Never react.

Strong for Yuki.

Never react.

Strong for his village.

Never react

Strong for everyone who now depended on him as their final hope against Riku.

Never. React.

But now? Looking down at the brother who had beaten him and humiliated him too many times to count now looking so helpless and pleading? Kaito just couldn't bring himself to hurt him.

Just like the failure his father always told him he was.

"Time's up." Riku commented before lunging forward with his still-wet kunai, Kaito diving out of the way with his mind numbing. Was this all really happening? Were those really his dead and dying brothers next to him, one of whom he had been ready to kill? Was the village he had grown up in really getting consumed by flames?

Who even *was* he anymore?

"Kaito, go evacuate the village!" Kuroshi snapped, tackling Riku away as he turned his scales invisible. "We will discuss your disobedience later—right now you need to step up and preserve what's left of the Clan."

Kaito was frozen for a few moments, but after his father shouted "*GO*!" he finally snapped out of his fog and turned on his tail, darting away towards the building flames.

He needed to be strong now.

Chapter End Notes

Wow, who knew you could pack so much trauma into one little chameleon? Hehe? Heh…

Just two more chapters for this arc! See ya in the next chapter! Thanks for reading! :D

Chapter 8: Nothing Left

Chapter Summary

> ”Yuki?” Kaito shouted as he hurried into the dojo, the sudden billow of smoke making him double over coughing. Tears filled his eyes and he desperately wiped them away, trying to go deeper into the room and search for survivors. “Mother? Anyone? Shout if you can hear me!”

Chapter Notes

> I’ve written so many of these chapters the past few days I’ll probably be posting them a lot lol XD But yay and welcome to a new chapter of The Art of Espionage! Last chapter was kinda a doozy hehehehehehe but the next chapter will be the last of this arc! ^^
>
> As always comments and kudos are greatly appreciated and I hope you enjoy! <333

See the end of the chapter for more notes

”Yuki?” Kaito shouted as he hurried into the dojo, the sudden billow of smoke making him double over coughing. Tears filled his eyes and he desperately wiped them away, trying to go deeper into the room and search for survivors. “Mother? Anyone? Shout if you can hear me!”

There was only the cracking of failing wood and roaring of the fire, but Kaito still felt anxious. He’d already found a few of his fellow Clan members and showed them the way out of various structures but hadn’t seen everyone personally. Likely they had already escaped, but he knew that if he was mistaken he would never forgive himself.

He already didn’t know if he’d be able to look at his reflection without shame again after what had happened to Ketsu.

And now Mugai was likely going to die slowly or be killed off by their father.

Don’t think about that don’t think about that don’t think about that…

Upon reassuring himself that the dojo was clear he darted out, gasping in the cooler air outside that was still filled with smoke but noticeably better than the quality inside. Bracing himself, he forced his tired limbs to continue on into the next home he came across, lungs screaming in protest. He called out again, straining his ears for any sign of survivors and doing his best to keep his mind clear.

He could process everything later, but right now he needed to *act*.

”Kaito?” Came a faint voice, and Kaito’s chest squeezed as he recognized Yuki. He hurried further into the flames, following the sound of her voice.

”Yuki? Are you hurt?” He shouted. “Tell me where you are!”

”Is that the little heir I hear?” Replied an unfamiliar voice, and Kaito skidded to a stop when he rounded a corner to see Yuki standing in front of a young kunochi named Kira, a large unknown chameleon cornering them. He turned around, a scar replacing one eye while the other sharpened at the sight of Kaito. His mouth spread in a toothy grin as he turned around, forgetting about Yuki and the hatchling. “Riku will be pleased to see you!”

There were more of them? Just how many attackers were there? Steeling himself he lifted his chin and got into a fighting stance. “The building is going to come down! You need to leave!”

”Bold words, weren’t you supposed to be the weak one? Regardless you will be coming with us whether you want to or not.” The stranger replied, and Kaito felt an angry surge rise up. Hadn’t he been through enough today? What else did the world want from him? His brothers were dead, his uncle was trying to kill him, his father was going to punish him for his weakness, his village was going up in flames, and now on top of it all this chameleon was still worried about capturing him instead of the collapsing building they were in? Kaito’s patience was all but gone at this point, a headache pounding behind his eyes from everything he was trying to suppress.

”Yuki, take Kira and get out of here! I’ll distract—oof!” Kaito yelped as he older chameleon pounced, shoving Kaito to the ground before the ninja regained his bearing and got his legs around his attacker’s, twisting his hips and sending him to the ground as well. He vanished from sight and dodged a shuriken, flinching slightly as it hit the floor behind him. He snatched it up and flung it at the spot he guessed his attacker had moved to, hearing a cry of pain and glad he hit his target. He leapt out of the way as the stranger tried to retaliate, watching as Yuki hurried the hatchling out of the room with a sort of satisfaction, turning back to the stranger he was fighting.

”You’ve done it now, kid! Our resistance is everywhere! You can’t escape us!” The chameleon shouted, bright red scales flashing briefly before he turned himself invisible once more. Kaito stiffened as he heard a cracking sound, quickly leaping away again as a fiery beam came down. He hissed as the cinders seared his scales. The sound clearly alerted the stranger, who finally succeeded in grabbing his tail and pulling him back as Kaito screamed.

”Let go of me!” Kaito shouted, skin crawling as he felt his captor’s hands all over him, pinning him to the ground. His head was pressed into the ground as he squirmed, feeling a bony knee dig into his back and a sweaty hand wrap around his throat.

”You put up quite the fight, little one. But this all ends now—we’ve already won.” The stranger panted, out of breath from both the fight and the smoke polluting the air. “Our new clan should be all over the village now, and if you’re alone then it likely means that your brothers and father have already been taken care of. Your mother should be quite easy to track down as well and is no match for our new clan.”

“Get off of him!” Came Yuki’s shout, and Katio’s attacker was forced to dodge off of him as a kunai whizzed over the young heir’s head. Kaito coughed, trying to get more air to fill his lungs but only feeding them with smoke instead. Yuki’s eyes were blazing as she stood in front of him, a second kunai already in hand that she must’ve grabbed once her charge was safe.

”Out of my way, kunochi!” The stranger seethed. “That heir is *mine*!”

”Kaito, you need to run!” Yuki told him firmly, and Kaito looked up in surprised, limbs trembling as he tried to get up.

”I can…” Kaito broke down in a fit of coughing, angry at himself for his display of weakness. “I can help! A true ninja never—“

”I don’t care about any of that right now!” Yuki snapped, and Kaito flinched. She *never* snapped at him like that. “They’re after *you!* Get out of here!”

”I’m not leaving!” Kaito protested, finally getting up as Yuki tackled the other chameleon, tail thrashing behind her as he struggled to keep him on the ground. “I’m… I’m the heir now! I need to stay and help fight!”

”You can’t help anyone if you’re dead!” Yuki pleaded. “Reinforcements are probably on their way, and the entire clan is already split up from evacuation. The village itself is coming down! There’s nothing left to protect! So go! Get out of here!”

”But what about—“

”*Please*, Kaito! I can’t hold him down for much longer!” Yuki’s eyes met his own, and her face softened ever so slightly. “Don’t make me beg, Kai. We will all survive this one way or another, and the only way you make it out alive is if you run. Now please leave, even if only for my sake.”

“I can’t—“ Kaito began, but a sudden cracking make everyone stop struggling and look up. The beams supporting the home had finally been eaten away by the hungry fire, and Kaito’s stomach dropped when he realized that the building was coming down. He desperately lunged forward to try to reach Yuki but was too late, body erupting in agony as cinders began raining down like a hailstorm. Splintering remains of the ceiling came down and knocked him to the ground, terror and desperation mingling together as he scrambled to get up but couldn’t before more debris piled on top of him. Searing pain exploded from every part of his body as the fire burned his scales, a large chuck of the roof finally coming down on his head.

There was a crack of agonizing discomfort before the world went black.

”Arashi!” Riku called out, limping out of the forest with a bitter anger that Kuroshi had fled the scene. The coward knew the fight was almost over and had let some of his ninjas distract his brother while he escaped, still the rightful leader of the Shinobi Clan. Arashi came over, covered from head to tail in soot and blistering wounds. “Did you find Kaito? He fled here to the village and I need him dead.”

”Then look no further.” Arashi smirked, teeth smudged with black. “I was with him before the building came down. There’s no way anyone could’ve survived.”

”You survived, didn’t you?” Riku raised an eye ridge. “I need to know that he is dead. Where is your proof?”

”I only survived because I was able to dodge the beams and make it to the door in time. Both he and some kunochi he called Yuki perished in the fire.” Arashi turned and gestured grandly to the wall of flames before them. “Look at it! There’s nothing left! Now all there is to do is find the clan members and round them up as your own, beginning a new village elsewhere.”

”Forget it.” Riku angrily looked away. “Kuroshi escaped.”

”What? How?” Arashi’s eyes widened, and Riku turned on him angrily.

”Because he’s a coward, that’s why! All that talk about being a true ninja and he left me to fight his lackeys instead of staying so I could kill him off.” Riku frowned at the fire. “Still, I don’t like leaving a job unfinished. Once the fire dies down I want to see Kaito’s body for myself.”

”If there’s a body to find, we’ll find it.” Arashi looked back at the flames. “But even if the fire destroys all evidence, there is no way anyone could’ve survived that building collapsing on top of them. Kaito is dead.”

Bjorn the Lynx looked up in irritation at a sharp knocking coming from the door, his grandfather Oskar grumbling as he set down his newspaper. “Who in chaos is coming to visit in this weather? It’s a snowstorm out there!”

”Maybe they’ll just go away?” Bjorn suggested, too comfy with his blanket and cocoa to want to get up. Wayward tourists weren’t uncommon in Winterburg, but still he had hoped that the thrashing storm outside would keep them away if only for the night. The knocking persisted and he sighed. “Fine I’ll get it. Hold your horses out there! I’m coming!”

”Nosy tourists.” Grumbled Oskar behind him as Bjorn opened the door, startling slightly as he saw a trembling chameleon covered in burns collapsed on his doorstep, cradling something against her chest.

”Great Gaia, lady! What happened to you?” Bjorn yelped. “How in chaos did you get burned all the way out here?”

”*Tasukete kudasai.*” (“Please help me.”) She mumbled, voice raspy and choked up. She opened her arms slightly to reveal a younger chameleon in her arms. “*Kare no mendō o mite.*” (“Take care of him.”)

“Uhhhh Oskar?” Bjorn called as she flinched and looked behind her. “A little help over here?”

His grandfather scowled from his comfy spot on the armchair. ”Who is it? Can’t they wait?”

”Not really, no.” Bjorn bent down to scoop up the child from her arms as she shakily tried to hand him to him, mind reeling. “Sorry lady, I can’t understand you. Just stay here and let me call you an ambulance or something—“

”*Kare no mendō o mite.*” (“Take care of him.”) She repeated, looking behind her worriedly. “*Moshi tsuite kitara ikanai to. Dōka kare o tasukete kudasai.*” (“They might’ve followed me so I have to go. Please help him.”)

”Sorry, I’m still lost. Just stay here and—what the?!” Bjorn yelped as she suddenly vanished from sight, leaving him staring at the winter storm with only the child in his arms. He looked down in shock, eyeing the burns and injuries in bewilderment. “Where in chaos did you come from??”

Chapter End Notes

Yikes, poor Kai! But at least he made it out alive… even though both Kuroshi and Riku also survived… hopefully he’ll have better luck in Winterburg!

Thanks for reading, and see ya in the next chapter! I’ll try to get it out on good ol’ Chaotix Tuesday lol ^^

Chapter 9: Kid?

Chapter Summary

> Kaito groaned slightly as he stirred, mind slowly coming to consciousness despite his desire to stay asleep. To be honest, slumbering forever didn't sound too bad at this point…
>
> *The pain of a cold kunai piercing the side of his neck.*
>
> *The sound of Ketsu's ragged, final breaths.*

Chapter Notes

> Happy Chaotix Tuesday, everyone! And welcome to a new chapter! :D
>
> I hope you enjoy! As always comments and kudos are greatly appreciated <333

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Kaito groaned slightly as he stirred, mind slowly coming to consciousness despite his desire to stay asleep. To be honest, slumbering forever didn't sound too bad at this point…

The pain of a cold kunai piercing the side of his neck.

The sound of Ketsu's ragged, final breaths.

The sight of Mugai begging for mercy from him.

The humiliation of being held down by someone much larger than himself.

The burning of the cinders.

The faint recollection of someone scooping him up when he was in too much agony to think straight…

Kaito gasped and sat up straight, crying out in pain as his various injuries screamed in protest. He flinched hard, trying to calm his breathing as it seemed that every movement somehow made everything worse. Where even was he? It was warm, but a strange warm. Like a fleeting heat that masked the cold outside, but it was spring! The weather was beautiful this time of year in the Shinobi village, and where else could he be?

”Hey kid, you awake?” Came a concerned voice, and Kaito nearly jumped out of his skin, trying to jump into a defensive stance but only succeeding in tangling in his blanket and falling off whatever cot he was on with a painful thump. He hissed and squeezed his eyes shut against the feeling.

“Oh geez! Take it easy, bud! You need to rest until the ambulance can make it through the storm to get here.” He pleaded, and Kaito peeked open an eye to see a tall lynx mobian staring down at him in concern.

“*Anata wa dare desu ka?*” (“Who are you?”) He demanded, not quite registering that these mobians were speaking a different language than he was used to in his panic. “*Naze koko ni iru no ka?*“ (“Why are you here?”)

“Uhhh… did ya get any of that?” The lynx asked his companion, who shrugged. “Alright, um… we are *friendly*, we no hurt *you*…”

”You sound like an idiot.” His friend sniffed. “Talking like that won’t help, Bjorn!“

“Well do you have any bright ideas then, Oskar? Or are you just going to sit there being all grumpy and such?” The first lynx—Bjorn, presumably—snapped back, and the two of them began to bicker as Kaito watched them carefully. It was becoming adamantly clear in his foggy mind that he was no longer in his village, which lined up with his memories of it all being burned to the ground and consuming himself in the fire as well.

So it wasn’t just a nightmare.

Then how did he get here?

”So you speak English?” Kaito asked slowly, doing his best to recall his lessons with Yuki, and they both stopped to look at him in bewilderment.

”Yeah, if ya don’t mind.” Bjorn shifted his weight uncomfortably. Kaito took a deep breath, the various slang and grammatically incorrect sentences making them more difficult to understand as he strove to translate.

”My apologies, our differential languages had not occurred to me. I am fluent in English as well, so we should be capable of conversing efficiently.” He replied formally, quickly turning his scales invisible and hearing his companions startle.

”Hey uh, yeah about that disappearing act you’ve got going on there.” Bjorn tilted his head. “Is that just something you can do on command? And regardless it would be best if the paramedics could *see* you instead of just blindly guessing your injuries off of my memory, which admittedly isn’t the sharpest tack in the box.”

”You can say that again.” Oskar grumbled, and Kaito stiffened.

”It… is preferable for my corporeal image to remain unrecognized.” He finally said calmly, and Bjorn scoffed.

”Geez, so many big book words. So you’ve got a big vocabulary *and* and turn yourself invisible? Where did ya even spawn from?! You some sort of spy or something?” He wriggled his eyebrows with a slight smirk. “Or an *espionager*, as you’d probably say?”

”*That* is not a word.” Called Oskar from the corner of the room, and Bjorn scowled.

”Yeah, well what’s the word for someone who espionages? That means spy, right? He’s not the only one who knows big words!” He frowned. “Really not an espionager? Is it an espio then? Or an espion? Or…”

”Espionage is an art—not a profession such as a builder or a doctor.” Oskar sighed. “The singular form would simply be a spy.”

”Well that’s no fun. Espio sounds cooler.” Bjorn muttered before turning back to Kaito. “What’s your real name, anyway?”

Kaito flinched, grimacing slightly at the memories those two syllables brought back. It was a name shouted by his father and called by his brothers and taunted by the attackers… and who knew who these new mobians were? He needed to be careful with who he talked to and what he revealed until he could get his bearings.

”…I have no name.” Kaito told him quietly, and Bjorn hesitated slightly as he was caught off guard before shrugging.

”Fine. Then we can use mine for now.” He crossed his arms. “So are you hungry? *Espio*?”

Kaito blinked. The name… wasn’t terrible. For now at least. It sure beat being called a ‘kid’ before like he was anything less than the mature ten-year-old he was. “Hunger is of the utmost irrelevance at the moment. For now I would very much like to inquire as to how I came to be here.”

”You sure English isn’t your first language? Keep talking like that and I’ll be the one who needs translating.” Bjorn grumbled. “But some lady chameleon dropped you off here before she disappeared and we haven’t seen her since. She was really banged up though—wish we could’ve gotten her to a hospital.”

Could that have been Yuki? Kaito’s stomach twisted as Bjorn continued. “She was sayin’ something in another language but I couldn’t understand her.”

”Do you recall what she said so I can translate?” Kaito asked hopefully, but Bjorn shrugged.

”Sorry, kid. I can’t really remember everything and besides that I doubt I could get my tongue to do what it’s supposed to do.” Bjorn apologized, and Kaito grimaced.

”Espio is fine.” He reminded, hating the condescending sound ‘kid’ had even though it was likely meant to be comforting. Bjorn chuckled slightly.

”Espio it is then. You can keep it if ya want—it really suits you.” He winked before straightening. “Hey Oskar! Any news on that ambulance?”

”They haven’t called since you talked to them.” Oskar commented back. “But hopefully the storm will clear soon.”

”Ambulance?” Kaito frowned. “I’m unfamiliar with that word. Would you please provide me with a definition?”

”It just means that some kind mobians are going to come and help you feel better.” Bjorn told him. “They’re going to let you ride in this really cool vehicle with lights and stuff and then probably figure out how to get you to a safe guardian, whether that be your parents or someone else.”

”Why would I need a guardian?” Kaito frowned, guard raising at the mobian’s words. Someone was going to come take him away? How would they even find his parents?

Well, Riku had.

Kaito shivered.

”Why would you—because you’re a *kid*, that’s why!” Bjorn exclaimed. “Was that lady we saw your mother? Or do you know where your parents are?”

”To answer your first inquiry, no.” Kaito told him. “And as for the second, I do not see how that information is relevant to you.”

Bjorn crossed his arms. “Well when a random kid is dropped off on my doorstep looking like he came straight from a volcano in the dead of winter then I’m not going to just let it go. Seriously, where did ya even get that beat up? There’s cuts and bruises all over you, not to mention the burns!” The lynx frowned. “Or that’s what I remember. Seriously, you can turn visible again. I already saw you.”

”You have already informed me of your less-than-ideal memory, so I have to conclude that you do not remember what I look like perfectly as to give an overly accurate description.” Kaito replied, and Oskar barked out a laugh.

”He’s got ya there, Bjorn!” He chortled. “Sharp kid.”

”I am not a kid.” Kaito clenched his jaw.

”Stubborn kid, too.” Oskar shrugged.

Kaito let out a huff but ignored him. “I appreciate your brief hospitality, but I will not be waiting around for some unknown Mobians to take me away—especially not back to where I came from.”

”Which is…?” Bjorn’s brow creased in concern. “Look, if you’re in a bad situation we can help you out. Honest.”

”I am not in need of assistance.” Kaito frowned and tentatively stepped off the cot. He winced slightly as his muscles ached and clenched up in protest but tried to shake off the

sensation, taking a few tentative steps. It wasn't easy, but he could walk and that was all that mattered. It took Bjorn a few moments to realize that he was no longer still.

"Woah—hey! Kid…"

"Espio." Kaito corrected firmly.

"Fine, *Espio* you gotta rest! You looked like you were seriously injured when ya got here!" Bjorn pleaded, holding out his arms awkwardly and trying to feel around for the chameleon. Kaito easily dodged his hands, rolling his eyes at the weak attempt to locate him. "Come on, I wasn't tryin' to scare you off. We're just trying to help you!"

"As aforementioned, I am in no need of your 'help'." Kaito insisted again. What was it with these people? *No one* in their right mind would ever help him without wanting something in return. And why would *he* shame himself by allowing strangers to aid him when he was perfectly capable of everything himself? He knew how to treat his wounds and knew which ones would heal on their own, so they had nothing to worry about.

"Well I'm not gonna let a kid go out on his own in the middle of a snowstorm." Bjorn crossed his arms, and Kaito hesitated. It was easy to forget that he was a cold-blooded mobian, and back where he used to live it hadn't snowed often so he never had to worry about it. But how would his already-weak body react to the freezing temperatures outside?

"Where is my shozoku?" He asked, looking around for his garment. Bjorn sighed.

"Is that the fancy name for that thing you were wearing earlier? It was full of tears and almost burned beyond recognition. I honestly thought it was just a ratty blanket to keep you warm." Bjorn hesitated at the silence that followed. "Uh… sorry I guess I should've thought about any sentimental purposes. I mean, I've got plenty of stuff you can borrow to keep warm! It'll all be a bit big on you, but at least you could—"

"I can uphold a certain appreciation for your offer, but unfortunately I will have to decline." Kaito muttered, averting his eyes. He knew that any clothing this lynx would let him borrow wouldn't disappear with him, and besides that he knew that his father would be *livid* that he had lost his shozoku…

Wait, was Kuroshi even still alive? Riku had been trying to kill him after all, and then there was his village burning up which might've killed his mother as well, his brothers were already dead, Yuki had left him here while apparently injured and not prepared for the cold…

Was he the only one left?

The thought hit him hard, and he stumbled back as he squeezed his eyes shut, trying to stop the onslaught of emotion threatening to put him to shame. A small whimper escaped him before he realized enough to stifle it, Bjorn's expression immediately softening as he kneeled down, searching blindly in the direction of the sound. "Hey… Es? You there bud? I'm sorry about your cloak thingy…"

”It’s not about that!” Kaito turned away, digging at his eyes. This was absolutely pathetic! But the emotions he’d been suppressing in order to survive were now overflowing, all swarming together in a deafening cacophony.

”It’s not?” Bjorn asked softly. “Then is it about something else? Maybe your parents…”

”*Don’t talk about them!*” Kaito snapped, and Bjorn held up his hands in a calming gesture.

”Okay, I won’t.” He told him. “Honestly I just want to help. If you don’t want my direct help, then at least tell me what I can do to help you help yourself. You’re not alone in this, okay? I know lots of mobians who’d be willing to offer you support or shelter or whatever you need.”

Kaito hesitated, Bjorn’s words striking a tender chord inside of him. He sounded so… compassionate. Empathy of any kind was something scarcely even *mentioned* in the Clan, much less practiced. But then again Riku had lured Mugai in that same way and look where it landed him! However his father’s cruelty had also pushed his followers and kin away, so what was right? Society seemed like a twisted web where every decision only led to the same center of primal instincts. There was no moral high ground but only… beings.

Beings who were inherently selfish, cruel and just trying to survive a heartless world that showed no mercy no matter who you were or where you were born.

Just a cold reality where the strong survived in misery and the weak died in shame.

”My apologies for causing you to worry.” Kaito said formally, using every ounce of his self control to help his voice steady. “I can assure you that it was unintentional and entirely unnecessary. It will not happen again.”

Bjorn’s face fell. He looked in Kaito’s direction for a long moment before sighing. “Sure, Es. Whatever you say.”

Kaito crept through the quiet cabin, blending comfortably into the darkness as he made his way towards the door. Oskar said he thought the ‘ambulance’ should be here in the morning, and Bjorn had hinted that he’d let some friends know the chameleon was here so they could help.

What was it with these mobians and their obsession with helping others?

It made Kaito’s skin crawl.

He hesitated at the sound of Oskar’s snore, glancing over at his two hosts who were sleeping by the fire so he wouldn’t be alone. There was something else besides a wary discomfort when they had insisted on trying to help him—something softer and almost tender. He couldn’t quite understand the feeling and didn’t know what to think about it. After all, he’d spent his entire life learning how to fend for himself, so why would he ever find comfort in someone taking care of *him* instead? And even though there was embarrassment at being treated like some child, there was also a longing spark in the deepest parts of his mind that yearned to be held.

To have someone tell him that he was just enough as he was.

That everything was going to be okay.

That they would never leave him for anything.

Kaito shuddered and shook off those thoughts, turning away from Bjorn and Oskar's sleeping forms. He couldn't spend time wishing for something he would never have—it only clouded his mind with a desperate frustration. He was more than capable of handling himself, and for the first time he was truly free from his Clan's expectations.

There was no way in Mobius that he would allow himself to be trapped like that again.

Maybe they were dead, or maybe they thought he was dead, but it didn't even matter anymore.

He had failed his family and only purpose in life.

There was nothing left to go back to, and he knew that he could never look his father in the eyes again after what happened anyway.

Kaito was *gone*.

So with a sharp breath, he carefully opened the door and slipped out, leaving the cabin as still and silent as if he'd never even been there in the first place.

Chapter End Notes

Whelp, that concludes the first arc of this story! Next chapter will be a bit of a time skip, but we might also see some new characters… perhaps some *familiar* characters… :3

Poor Kaito… hopefully he can learn to accept help before it's too late! After all, society isn't exactly built around allowing a kid on his own to remain alone…

Next chapter out Thursday, so see ya then! :D

Chapter 10: Arc 2: A Ghost in Seaside City

Chapter Summary

> *Seven months later…*
>
> Vector the Crocodile leaned back in his chair, groaning at the large heap (he had given up trying to stay organized halfway through) of bills that lay haphazardly on his desk. Well this was just perfect, wasn't it? Now he wasn't just a wannabe detective, but he was a detective who was far behind on his rent and too stubborn to admit to his folks that his big dreams of becoming a hotshot private investigator were taking a bit longer than he had hoped.

Chapter Notes

> Hey everyone, and welcome to Arc 2! Let's see what our lil guy has been up to since Bjorn's cabin… I hope you all enjoy! :DDD
>
> As always comments and kudos are greatly appreciated, and thank you all so much for all your support so far <333

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Seven months later…

Vector the Crocodile leaned back in his chair, groaning at the large heap (he had given up trying to stay organized halfway through) of bills that lay haphazardly on his desk. Well this was just perfect, wasn't it? Now he wasn't just a wannabe detective, but he was a detective who was far behind on his rent and too stubborn to admit to his folks that his big dreams of becoming a hotshot private investigator were taking a bit longer than he had hoped.

He had… found some raccoon lady's keys, so that was something, right? It barely paid anything, but he was clearly desperate and needed some experience. He doubted any of the other elderly Mobians at her bingo would serve as good referrals, but he supposed anything was better than nothing. After all he advertised himself as never turning down any work that pays, and although it was vague it was also true.

Vector scowled at the stupidly tiny print marching across all of the papers, all formal proclamations of the common knowledge that he was broke. 'Final warning' this and 'last chance' that… it was all getting old. He was already living off of frozen pizzas and canned goods—what more did they want from him?

”Alright Vector, focus.” The crocodile took a deep breath. “You can go without any cable for a bit… the neighbors never read their papers anyway so you can get the latest news from those. A little dumpster dive never hurt anyone. Lights would be a bother… but it could also be some good practice! A detective needs to be able to navigate any terrain… and you could maybe sell some more furniture…”

Vector frowned doubtfully at the barren room. Really all it had was the desk, chair and old fashioned record player he couldn’t part with, and he knew that the second floor of the narrow building wasn’t much better. There was a mattress without a bed frame in one room and a couple odds and ends he’d brought from home in the others but nothing much else. But he was the only one staying here, so what was the harm in it? It was almost cozy in a sense—just a gritty detective living life solo and trying to navigate life and cases like the tough gumshoe he was. He lived by his own rules and came and went as he pleased, not tied down to anyone and willing to take on anything that came his way.

The phone rang and Vector nearly jumped out of his skin, staring at the device as if it had been personally handed to him by an angel as an answer to his prayers before pouncing on it and taking a deep breath to compose his voice. “Ahem—you’ve reached Vector the Crocodile, Private Investigator at the Chaotix Detective Agency. What can I do for you?”

”Hello Mr. Vector, this is Hank the Mountain Goat.” Came the voice from the other end, and Vector straightened. Starting out with a formal greeting? The slight waver of uncertainty in his voice? This was sounding less like a scam call and more like an actual case! Vector could’ve kissed the phone in relief as Hank continued. “Sorry to call like this, and it might sound a bit crazy.”

”Well I can assure you that there’s no job too big and no gig too small!” Vector struggled to keep himself from sounding overly-eager. “What can I help you with?”

”It’s not really for me, but my grandmother Meredith. She uh…” Hank hesitated before sighing. “Okay just bear with me here, but she’s certain she’s being haunted.”

Vector blinked. “Um… excuse me?”

”She believes there’s a friendly ghost that comes by every day, and she even sets out food for it.” He explained, and Vector’s face scrunched up in confusion. “Now there’s no doubt that *someone* is taking her food, but I don’t think it’s what she believes. Maybe a rowdy teenager looking for free food or some thief taking advantage of her kindness, but she’s absolutely adamant and won’t call the police. She even goes into specifics on how the ghost likes the nighttime best and has specific food tastes and stuff like that. I thought maybe you could just catch whoever it is taking her food and save her the trouble of making all these random dishes for some freeloader.”

”Well Mr. Hank, I can assure you that I’ll do everything in my power to catch this mystery thief and prove that your grandmother isn’t haunted.” Vector’s tail thrashed happily behind him as adrenaline flooded his system. “Consider this detective on the case!” He hesitated slightly, adding, “Also, for research purposes, how did ya hear of me?”

”My grandmother attends a bingo group and heard that you helped her friend find her keys or something like that. She was telling me the story and I thought it was worth a shot.” Hank told him. “Besides, you were the cheapest P.I. I could find.”

”Wow, full circle.” Vector muttered.

”What was that?” Hank asked.

”Nothing! See ya tonight!” Vector replied.

”That boy just doesn’t get it.” Meredith the Mountain Goat muttered, overhearing the conversation Hank had with some gumshoe as she was bringing some dried seaweed to her window. “Not all ghosts are mean and scary. Isn’t that right, my little friend?”

She glanced out at the night, looking around before sighing and setting her offering down on the open windowsill. “I know you like to keep to yourself, so here you go. I brought your favorite.” She chuckled, turning away and beginning to hobble back to her living room.

She heard a soft swish and smiled, not even having to turn around to know that the seaweed was gone.

As he made his way through the back forest with his prize, Espio remained alert for any traces of him being followed. He had heard that grandson inside talking to someone on the phone about him and it made him uneasy, even though he was confident in his ability to remain unseen.

After all, he’d already been hiding out in Seaside City for about six months. What could possibly happen now?

Espio hesitated, looking around carefully before quickly scaling a tree and sitting on a branch with his back to the trunk, taking a bite of his seaweed. When he had left that cabin in Winterburg his only goal had been to find somewhere warmer to stay, body shutting down from the hefty amounts of snow and no proper gear. He’d never realized just how *big* the world was until he was no longer an heir but a small insignificance roaming around aimlessly, feeling very small as he invisibly walked the crowds. But that was the way of the ninja—unseen, and unheard. The name Bjorn had given him really stuck, offering him a new identity in his mind that helped block out the trauma. He just needed to keep moving forward, and he couldn’t do that if he was stuck in the past.

So he’d stopped thinking about all of it.

About everything he’d lost.

About his dead brothers.

About his murderous uncle.

About his disappointed father.

About how Yuki likely died in the storm.

About the chance that someone had followed him…

Espio hissed and grabbed his head, squeezing his eyes shut. How stupid *was* he? He couldn't think of thinking about any of that! He repeated to his brain to shut the heck up, practicing breathing exercises until his mind cleared and he opened his weary eyes. He gripped the branch he was on, the rough bark offering a grounding sensation for him to focus on. The world wasn't kind to someone like him on his own, and he'd quickly realized that his own perception of maturity was vastly different from everyone else in Mobius.

Apparently it was a common agreement that eighteen years of age marked the beginning of adulthood.

Such a ridiculous number.

He also couldn't allow himself to be seen, since people were always worried and obsessed over the 'scrawny kid on his own' instead of minding their own business and treating him fairly. Was it so hard for them to accept that he was simply trying to get along in the world? He'd realized through observation that most things were obtained through the trading of currency for whatever it was you desired, but when he had collected enough rings from wishing fountains or the side of the streets people *still* wouldn't take them! It was always some nosy question asking about his parents or why he wasn't at 'school', which was apparently a place that mobians his age would go to learn.

The world was so strange out here.

No wonder he was never allowed to leave the village.

He'd gotten around though, traveling from city to city and trying to figure things out as he went. Apparently chameleons weren't very common, and by default it meant that most people were unaware of their invisibility techniques. People would just sell clothing made from disappearing material without even realizing it, and Espio had only stumbled upon that fact when he'd been searching for shoes to help his aching feet and watched a large pair of boots disappear with his hand.

He'd promptly taken them with him.

Along with a pair of gloves, since he had to climb quite often to evade discovery.

Eventually he'd come across Seaside City, immediately feeling at home in the pleasant climate and gorgeous views. Many people often came as tourists to visit the beach, and that also meant plenty of food thrown away carelessly for him to find and consume. Not the healthiest stuff in the world, and still he'd lost plenty of weight, but it was something. Lots of city dwellers here also kept their windows open for the calming ocean breeze, offering him a quick grab if anything was set on the sill to cool. Most Mobians didn't think much of it, often blaming non-sapient raccoons or flickies.

But Meredith had been different.

The elderly mountain goat insisted he was a ghost of some sort, having witnessed her baked goods raise unnaturally into the air more than once. Those moments had been careless mistakes on his part, usually on days when he was tired or weak from hunger, but as long as it kept her on the wrong trail then he couldn't see how it was something to waste concern on. Even if she told someone, who would believe her? Her own grandson thought she was crazy! After he had voiced his concerns Espio had tried to space out his thefts, hoping no one else would make the connections and realize it wasn't just a pest problem, but Meredith's cooking and baked goods were too delicious to pass up. Besides, as long as no one recognized him and knew the dishonor he was bringing upon himself them he supposed there was no harm done.

So someone was going to come try and find him? Some 'private investigator' thought they could keep up with a trained ninja?

Well they were gravely mistaken.

Chapter End Notes

Whelp, it looks like Es has found a new home and a new name! AND VECTOR ENTERS THE PLOT!! But it's only a matter of time for our lil chameleon… hehe…

Next chapter out Saturday, so see ya then! ^^

Chapter 11: The Blink of an Eye

Chapter Summary

> ”Detective Vector. Glad you’re here.” Hank answered the door. “My grandmother’s inside making rice cakes.”
>
> Vector frowned. “Rice cakes? That’s… oddly specific.”
>
> Hank sighed. “She’s certain that the ‘ghost’ loves her seaweed and rice cakes the best. Said it doesn’t often take anything with dairy in it, or if it does then it takes longer to.”

Chapter Notes

> Hey everyone, and welcome to a new chapter of The Art of Espionage! :D Let’s see how Vector’s investigation goes…
>
> As always comments and kudos are greatly appreciated, and I hope you enjoy! <333

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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> Hank sighed. “She’s certain that the ‘ghost’ loves her seaweed and rice cakes the best. Said it doesn’t often take anything with dairy in it, or if it does then it takes longer to.”
>
> ”I’m not crazy, Hank!” An elderly voice called out, presumably Meredith. “You can tell that P.I. to turn his tail right back around and leave me in peace! My little friend doesn’t like to be watched, and that’s their right!”
>
> ”*Please* help me out here.” Hank pleaded, lowering his voice. “She’s too sweet for her own good and I don’t like the thought of someone taking advantage of her like this.”
>
> ”I told ya to get off my porch, you young whipper-snapper!” Meredith shouted.
>
> ”Yeah, she seems really… sweet.” Vector commented doubtfully, and Hank chuckled weakly.
>
> ”Maybe compassionate is a better word. And at times just passionate.” Hank sighed. “She’s really fiery for her age, but if she makes up her mind to help someone then there’s no chance

of swaying her."

"Um… I don't mean to be disrespectful, Ma'am!" Vector called out, tentatively stepping inside. "I'm just here to make sure that everything's… erm… safe around here…"

"Oh stuff it, alligator!" Meredith snapped, hobbling into sight as Vector gulped. "You're just here to bother my ghost friend and everyone knows it!"

"I'm actually a crocodile, Ma'am…" Vector corrected, struggling to hide his vexation.

"Hmph. Calls himself an investigator and isn't even a gator. That's just false advertising." She muttered, and Vector grimaced. Of course the two species looked *sort of* similar (Vector personally couldn't see the resemblance, but he supposed that identical twins often faced the same dilemma when they could determine seemingly obvious differences that were almost imperceptible to the untrained eye) but it was still a strong pet peeve of his to be mistaken for an alligator. A crocodile was a part of identity—it's who he *was*. Of course perhaps some people couldn't understand the vexation they caused with the accidental slip-ups, and logically he knew that it wasn't entirely their fault and that mistakes happened, but it still irked him. Meredith's eyes narrowed. "Now you listen here, Mr. Crocodile. My ghost doesn't like any sort of social interaction or speculation. It's a shy little fellow and I want it to feel safe around here, you got that? So get off my property!"

"It's *our* property…" Hank reminded, and she let out a huff.

"All ridiculous legal details, pish posh." She muttered angrily to herself as she went to retrieve a rice cake. "But I'm tellin' ya—the ghost won't take anything if it's bein' watched."

"A reasonable consideration, Ma'am, but I can assure you that it won't even know I'm here!" Vector piped up, trying to stay positive, but she grabbed the plate and looked at him as if he were the biggest idiot she'd ever laid eyes on.

"Oh it *knows*." She smirked slightly as she set the plate gently on her windowsill. "It *always* knows."

"With all due respect, I pride myself in being well versed with the art of *stealth*." She stepped away from the window, and his eyes followed her despite the mischievous look she wore. "I'm a detective, after all! A certified gumshoe. Believe me when I say that no one can sneak up on a trained private eye!"

"Are you sure about that?" She asked, smirk widening. Vector sighed and gestured emphatically to the window.

"Sure I'm sure! That ghost will never—WHAT IN CHAOS where did it go?!" The crocodile yelped when he looked back to the sill to see the rice cake gone, the space empty as if nothing had been there in the first place. He rushed over and stuck his head out of the opening, looking left and right into the empty forest. "But I don't… I didn't hear… this doesn't make any sense…"

"I tried to warn ya." Meredith shrugged. "It's a sneaky little fellow."

”But… wait…” Vector pointed an accusing finger, forgetting his etiquette briefly. “You made me look away!”

”My ghost was probably hungry. You were only delaying it’s dinner.” Meredith told him.

”And you?! You didn’t see anything?” Vector asked Hank, who sighed.

”You don’t think I’ve tried to just watch the food before?” The mountain goat looked bitterly to the window. “It’s always the second I blink or the moment I have to scratch an itch. I’ve given up trying to catch it at this point.”

Vector took a sharp breath, briefly closing his eyes to think. So this would be a bit harder than he thought, but what was a detective story without an unexpected twist? He could handle this no problem, right?

Of course right.

”Okay, that’s fine.” Vector turned his attention back to Meredith. “Maybe let’s start with why you think it’s so hungry?”

She shrugged. “It always takes my food faster than I can turn around. It used to be just here and there until I started setting some aside specifically for it to have, and setting a schedule. Now it knows when I make stuff for it and is ready.”

Vector felt a sharp pang in his chest. So whoever it was might actually need the help? It… did put things in a different perspective, but it didn’t excuse this behavior. There were other options for help such as food banks or perhaps even family and friends—this stranger didn’t have to make a poor old woman question her own sanity. She should at least know who it was she was helping!

Perhaps the thief was too proud to reach out for help.

”Okay, new plan: you put another rice cake out. I’m going to go outside and watch.” Vector straightened. “It might be able to snag the food, but there’s no way it can get away from me that easily. Everything makes some sort of sound!”

”Except for ghosts.” Meredith pointed out.

Vector grimaced. “We’ll see about that. I’m headed out.”

Espio smirked slightly to himself as he watched the detective stick his head out the window, pathetically trying to spot him when he was already safe back in his tree. He’d been in plain sight—standing invisibly right in front of the rice cake until the moment Vector turned aside. He then timed it with Hank’s blinking and snatched the food off the sill, silently making off with his prize.

It was too easy.

Now Meredith was setting out a second rice cake, Vector promising to go outside and catch him. He already had the first one, but what harm was there in a little challenge?

This would be fun.

Vector stared at the sill, eyes watering as he kept them open and on the rice cake. What was taking so long? Had the ghost—no, not a ghost, he reminded himself—gotten full and left them alone? But being a detective meant that you had to have grit, so the crocodile persisted.

His eyes *were* getting dry though, and painfully so. They had begun to water which helped a bit, but overall he still longed to blink. What if the thief took the cake in that moment though? It seemed impossible that anyone could move that fast, but still.

Great Gaia, how long am I going to have to wait? Vector thought to himself as his eyes burned, and after a few moments he finally allowed himself to quickly blink and open them again.

The rice cake was gone.

”For the love of—!” Vector scowled, looking left and right around the silent forest before stomping over and looking for any clues. How in the world was this even possible? In one blink, how could anyone come over, snatch a rice cake, and then disappear without any sound or trace? Not to mention that whoever it was must’ve been watching Vector closely, but when the crocodile looked around he could see no one. It was really starting to get on his nerves—how could he call himself a gumshoe when he couldn’t even catch someone stealing rice cakes from a little old lady?

”I told ya.” Came Meredith’s call, and Vector sighed.

”Think, Vector!” He grumbled under his breath, looking back out at the trees. “It’s obviously not a ghost. Well, less obvious now but still there has to be a reasonable explanation. Whoever this is has to be smart as a whip and real sneaky—maybe a smaller Mobian? Or someone with really long arms who could snatch the cake away quickly? Or… or maybe even a bird? Oh this is getting me nowhere.” Vector squinted at the ground. “If it’s a bird it would’ve left no footprints, but I would’ve heard the wings. Unless it was an owl… I think they have silent wings or something like that… but then again birds aren’t the only Mobians who can fly… in fact some birds *can’t*… just check for footprints!”

The crocodile kneeled down, sharp eyes scanning the mulch that bordered the forest and littered the spot under the windowsill. Come to think of it, this was the perfect house to target for someone trying to remain unseen. It was on the edge of Seaside City so it still had a pleasant climate but also had a forest around back so anyone could easily hide. However trees *would* make it harder for any flying creature…

There! Vector almost shouted for joy as he finally noticed a small patch of leaves brushed away. To anyone else it might look like a natural occurrence from a slight breeze or small critter (and maybe to anyone *sane* as well), but at this point Vector was desperate and would

take anything he could get. He gently brushed some of the mulch to the side to see light indentations in the moist forest floor. Were those… ridges? Of a boot, perhaps?

Vector frowned and compared the size to his own shoe. It was considerably smaller, but then again that didn't help him a whole lot since mobians came in all shapes and sizes.

It did tell him that it had feet *for* in boots, though.

And regardless, it had given him his first clue.

Chapter End Notes

Whelp, looks like our crocodile got his first clue! Hopefully he can figure out who this 'ghost' is soon… :3

Next chapter out Tuesday, so see ya then! :D

Chapter 12: A Pathetic Display

Chapter Summary

Vector walked around to the back of Meredith's house the next day, feeling renewed as he carried a large bag with him. He looked around warily, knowing that he had about an hour until it was technically time for the mountain goat to set out a meal for her ghost.

The first thing he did was set an invisible ink pad he'd gotten at the craft store (technically made for kids, but a true detective took what he could get) down at the base of the window, partially covering it with leaves and nodding to himself. A black light was hidden in the pocket of his long brown coat (okay he might've gotten a bit carried away when he saw a costume store next to the craft store, he could own that one, but a new outfit got his creative juices flowing), and when he stepped back he couldn't even see the pad peeking through the leaves. It would only be revealed if the mulch was dragged away, such as by a footstep.

Chapter Notes

Hey everyone, and welcome to a new chapter! Let's see how Vector's investigation plays out… I hope you enjoy! :D

Also thank you all so much for 50 kudos and all your kind comments so far!! I love reading your thoughts and reactions and am so happy you're enjoying the story! <333

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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He then set up a rope with a noose on one end, leading the rest of the coil around to tie it to a branch. He loosely scattered leaves across it while making sure it was still visible, nodding to

himself and feeling quite proud of his plan.

The final thing he did was set up a recording device inside a bush, grateful for his tough scales as he maneuvered the lens to peek through an opening in the brambles and face the window. He'd made sure to give it a full battery and made certain to turn it on before stepping back and facing it. "Twenty-four hour use, huh? Let's see if that cheap camera store had it right." He muttered before clearing his throat. "This is Vector the Crocodile, working day two of the Case of the Seaside City Ghost. I have come prepared this time—collecting tools in accordance with what I've induced about this 'ghost' after my last-night observations…"

"Why are ya talkin' so weird?" Meredith shouted from her house, and Vector grimaced in irritation.

"I'm not talking weird!" He protested. "Just… erm… making sure that I log everything properly!" He heard her huff and waited for her to hobble away, turning to give the camera a subtle wink. "More about the case later."

Espio hurried through the trees, urged on by his stomach rumbling. A true ninja was very intuitive when it came to the cycles of the day and the fluctuations of nature, helping him keep track of time without the use of little wrist bands that he's seen a lot of mobians use. Perhaps theirs were more accurate to the minute, but since he didn't have anything filling his days then it didn't really affect him.

To his slight surprise he found the detective still there, pacing back and forth in front of the window sill. Espio could admire his perseverance, even if it *was* in vain. He narrowed his eyes as Vector didn't even attempt to mask his footsteps crunching in the leaves, tail twitching in confusion. Didn't the so-called gumshoe realize that he was only making it easier for him to take the rice cake and seaweed sitting there on the windowsill? His guard instantly raised as he slowly climbed down the tree and silently took a few steps forward, never taking his eyes off of the crocodile.

"Ugh, get a job as a detective, they said." Vector muttered to himself, pacing harder. "It'll be fun, they said. Now I have to wait for some pseudo-ghost to show up… and maybe it never will…"

The voice was too loud. Espio froze, the gears in his mind turning as he tried to figure out the crocodile's odd behavior. His stomach grumbled in protest at the wait but Espio just couldn't let this go as he glanced around his surroundings to see if anyone else was waiting for an ambush or if there was something else going on.

There! Espio smirked as he saw a loop of rope mostly buried in the mulch, extending out to something in the forest that he could only assume was a trap of some sort. This was the best the detective could do? He really thought he could trick a trained ninja? Espio hesitated slightly, eyeing how long the rope was and concerned that making contact with any part of it would spring the trap and alert the detective of his presence. He had to give it to Vector—the loud muttering and pacing had almost distracted him enough to blindly step in the noose

conveniently placed in his usual route to the windowsill. However there was enough space for him on the other side, so he extended his tail for balance and silently leapt over the rope.

Crack!

Espio gasped as his foot landed awkwardly on something hard underneath the leaves, jumping back from the sound it produced when struck and landing harshly on his backside. He stifled a hiss and struggled to get up, the fall briefly turning him visible before he switched again, chest clenching when he saw Vector leap at him. In a flash he dug through the leaves, grabbing a handful of lose dirt and flinging it in the crocodile's eyes.

"Ack!" Vector stumbled back, clawing at his eyes. Espio swiftly wrapped his thin tail around one of Vector's legs, yanking hard to throw him off balance before hopping back up and barreling into his side. The crocodile went down with a surprised grunt, Espio snatching the rice cake and seaweed and scurrying away, irritated at himself for being so foolish. How could he have missed his landing like that? How could he have not seen that rock or whatever it was hidden in the leaves? His father would never approve.

Speaking of his father…

Espio hesitated, glancing down at the food in his hands. He could almost hear the dark whispers of Kuroshi's voice in his mind, almost see the disgusted look in his eyes.

With a pang in his chest, he tossed his rations aside and continued on.

He didn't deserve to eat anyway.

Not after that pathetic display.

Vector groaned as he sat up, eyes burning. Okay, so he hadn't planned on the thief being a decent fighter. Seriously, the dirt in his eyes was a low blow! However the fast movements to catch him off guard were a smart move, given the crocodile's size and brute strength in direct combat. But still he couldn't help but smirk to himself slightly, knowing that his culprit was definitely smaller than himself and had a long, thin tail covered in scales.

Not to mention that flash of visibility, which he had gotten on the camera of his.

Vector hurried over to the bush where his device was hidden, pressing the button that deactivated the recording process as he flipped around the screen and stiffened at the red battery symbol that greeted him against a dark background.

Stupid cheap camera store.

The crocodile scowled as he shook out his sore muscles and returned to the windowsill, pulling out his black light. "Think about what you know! The mobian was probably a reptile or amphibian of some kind—at least something scaly and with a long tail. Also the fact that I saw it for a second means that it can *definitely* turn itself invisible somehow… maybe just a trick it has? Or a cloak or something?" Vector frowned. "Didn't see a cloak though… was

that purple that I saw? Perhaps? It also could've been just an ability they had, like that Sonic kid and his speed, or maybe correlating to the animal like a chameleon or something… I think it actually might've *looked* like a chameleon or something of the sort when I saw it… I can figure that out later."

Vector kneeled down and shined his light onto the leaves, grinning when—sure enough—he could see splatters of his ink scattered in the leaves while the creature ran away. He quickly started to follow the footprints, knowing that the ink would likely wear off the mobian's boot if they ran far enough.

He hurried deeper and deeper into the woods, weaving around trees and obstacles. Some of the rocks and bushes that the mobian weaved between were a tight fit for the six-foot crocodile, but he didn't mind too much as it only confirmed what he had figured out during their brief fight. He rounded a tree and hesitated slightly, blinking as he found the rice cake and seaweed tossed aside. What… why had the thief dropped them? It could've been an accident, but given the nature of this culprit Vector highly doubted it. The mobian had their prize in their hands! Why give it up now?

Perhaps it was only grabbing the food to prove it's superiority to the detective or just to prove that it could? But then why take from Meredith to begin with and remain anonymous?

Was it trying to prove something to *itself*?

Vector sighed as he realized that the footprints faded out soon afterwards, shrugging and turning away.

At the very least he knew something new about this ghost.

The most important thing being that it *definitely* wasn't a ghost.

Chapter End Notes

Whelp, looks like Vector's not as easy to trick as Espio thought he was! Poor guy needs to learn to not be so hard on himself… but hopefully this gets Vector closer to the truth! ^^

Next chapter out Thursday, so see ya then! :D

Chapter 13: A Break In The Case

Chapter Summary

Espio stiffened in irritation as he saw that nosy detective once again ‘guarding’ Meredith’s windowsill. It had been a week—did this crocodile not know when to quit? It had all been an entertaining challenge at first, but it was starting to get old *fast*—especially after the gumshoe began to adapt and craft up more clever plans that Espio was irked to admit came close to catching him. Was it too much to ask for an easy meal? Of course he could go dumpster diving again, but Meredith’s cooking was far better and much preferred.

Chapter Notes

Hey everyone, and welcome to a new chapter of The Art of Espionage! I hope you enjoy! :D

▶ Minor TW spoilers below ^^

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Espio stiffened in irritation as he saw that nosy detective once again ‘guarding’ Meredith’s windowsill. It had been a week—did this crocodile not know when to quit? It had all been an entertaining challenge at first, but it was starting to get old *fast*—especially after the gumshoe began to adapt and craft up more clever plans that Espio was irked to admit came close to catching him. Was it too much to ask for an easy meal? Of course he could go dumpster diving again, but Meredith’s cooking was far better and much preferred.

”Hey pseudo-ghost, wanna play Go Fish?” Vector called out casually, and shrugged when Espio didn’t respond. “Eh, it was worth a shot. But I know you’re watching me, I know you’re a a reptile, I know you’re either purple or wearing that color, I know you can turn invisible… what’s the point in being so secretive? The rice cake is here waiting whenever you’re ready for it.”

Espio rolled his eyes. Did the detective really think he was going to fall for that? It irked him how condescending Vector sounded, probably unintentionally but still. He watched carefully until the crocodile glanced down at his cards before snatching the rice cake and holding it close to his chest—covering it with his body so that it too would remain unseen. Vector sighed before he even looked up. “Don’t you think this is getting old, bud? I know you’re there. Tell ya what—I can get you some help with food or shelter or whatever it is you need if you’d just show yourself and admit that you’re not a ghost. How does that sound?” Vector

went over to place another rice cake on the windowsill, lingering and letting his eyes scan the foliage. “Really? Nothing? This is a pretty good offer, you know.”

The crocodile stayed in front of the cake, crossing his arms. “I’m stayin’ right here. Whenever you’re ready to show yourself I’ll take ya out for a full meal. I mean, funds are kinda low right now… oh never mind that! Maybe I can make ya something! I’ve gotten quite proficient at microwave meals, if I do say so myself…”

Espio stiffened in irritation. What was he even doing? Trying to steal from people’s windows and timing his strikes with some ridiculous gumshoe who knew he was there? That wasn’t the way of a ninja! That was the way of beggar.

And he was no beggar.

Silent as the wind he turned on his tail and began making his way through the forest, leaving the ignorant detective alone. He decided to head back into the city, even though all the hustle and bustle made his brain hurt. No matter how much he tried he just couldn’t get accustomed to the noise—the vendors shouting at tourists to purchase from them, the angry drivers snapping at the traffic, the wailing of a child who had just dropped their ice cream cone… it was all too much. However at night it was slightly more bearable even if it *was* more dangerous with less reasonable people and more thugs and drunkards stumbling out of bars. He could avoid them easily enough with his invisibility, but more than once he’d witnessed innocent mobians walking alone at night only to be jumped by someone in a tacky mask and wielding some form of weapon. Often some young hero would run through—Sonic the Hedgehog, people called him, and Espio could recall ~~Mugai~~ mentioning him—to stun the attacker, handing the purse or wallet back to it’s owner with a confident flare. They’d thank him profusely, and then with a wink and a flash of blue he’d be gone, likely off to the next city.

He seemed so… free.

Running around Mobius and living life to the fullest.

And not often alone, as he had a young, two-tailed fox aiding him in many fights.

Espio shook himself, trying to ignore the pang of longing in his chest. He was fine by himself, and there was no way in *chaos* that he’d allow himself to be trapped by others again. Why anyone would subject themselves to such torture was beyond him, but he supposed that they just hadn’t witnessed the darker side of society yet.

Blissful ignorance.

Something he’d never be able to go back to.

He made his way long a narrow alley, eyes set on a filled-to-the-brim dumpster. His stomach rolled slightly at the thought of the stench, but he couldn’t be picky. With a set face he looked around to ensure that he was alone before darting over towards his prize.

He heard a slight whimper and stiffened, freezing in place as he strained his ears. He had checked, hadn't he? Where had the sound come from?

Had he been followed?

Had one of his clan members or enemies found him…

His chest squeezed, muscles tensing up as it suddenly became very hard to breathe. He clenched his jaw and squeezed his eyes shut, trying to keep his inhalations silent even though his lungs were screaming at him. It was just a ridiculous reaction to a ridiculous memory—why would any of the chameleons he knew *whimper*? But his body refused to believe he was safe and a headache began to pound behind his eyes as he suppressed it all, trying to will away the onslaught of memories.

His tail coiled and tighter around his own leg in an attempt to ground himself as he stumbled around the side of the dumpster, trying to get away from whatever phantom trauma his brain had convinced him was there. His foot caught on something hidden behind the metal bin, sending him crashing to the ground noisily. He hissed as his scales scraped against the asphalt, feeling a fiery burn flare up.

Shut up shut up shut up…

He promptly shoved his own arm into his mouth, biting down hard to muffle himself as he remained silent, heart pounding so loudly he was certain all of Mobius could hear him. He needed to be quiet—he wasn't alone and besides that he was above withering his dignity in pain.

Ninjas didn't cry.

Ever

Especially for something as small as this.

He took a deep breath, knowing that hunger and the lack of sleep was likely doing it's best to make him more emotional. Pathetic. He bit down again on his arm, appreciating the grounding sensation of pain. The chameleon waited like that for a few more moments before slowly releasing himself and looking around warily. No one had come for him by some miracle, but he still chided himself for being so careless. The question remained: who had whimpered if no one was in the alley?

Another small whine echoed through and made him flinch, realizing that it was originating from right next to him. He frowned at the object that had tripped him—a small, cardboard box. Was… was the noise coming from there? But who—

Espio slowly stood up, ignoring the stinging from his injuries as he gingerly peeled back one of the flaps and peered inside.

He was greeted by the sight of an young bee, wriggling uncomfortably in his sheets and wailing with his little face scrunched up.

Espio's stomach dropped. What in the world? A baby this young needed his parents! Why was he left alone like this, and in an alley no less? The baby screamed again, and Espio winced as the sound pierced his ears. He glanced around to ensure it was just the two of them before turning himself visible so that the child knew he wasn't alone. The little bee went silent, staring up at him with wide, tear-stained eyes. Espio squinted at the sticky note stabled to the front of the blanket, reading 'CHARMY' in big letters.

It was a very old note.

Espio's stomach rolled.

He was starting to realize that the child must be abandoned, but the note suggested some form of hope that he would be be found. Perhaps the child was handed down from various mobians in the hopes that someone would take him, only for someone to finally break the cycle and leave him next to the dumpster as if he were nothing more than thrown-out goods.

To be discarded and left to die.

Unwanted and unloved.

Not supposed to exist.

Just like he had been.

~~*Shards of old eggshells littering the rocks at the bottom of the cliff… phantom imaginings of screams plaguing his mind as he thought of all the children who had been so brutally killed before they even got the chance to live… knowing that he was almost one of them…*~~

The baby started to cry again and he winced, brought back to reality as he hesitated mere moments before scooping the child into his arms awkwardly. His heart hammered as Charmy shivered and nuzzled into him, unsure of what to do next. He was in no way, shape or form prepared to take care of a child as young as this, but how could he leave him there? The baby giggled slightly, babbling and reaching up towards Espio's face. The chameleon remained frozen as small, weak hands felt around his horn and cheeks, a strange feeling in his chest. Yep—there was no way he was going to let this child die. But what could he do? He could barely feed himself much less figure out how to take care of a baby!

He hesitated sightly, thinking back to his one-sided interactions with that determined detective, Vector. Although annoying, the crocodile had displayed impressive amounts of perseverance and persistence as long as he was on the case. Whether out of personal principle or desperation for pay Espio wasn't sure, but what was it he'd heard him mention to Meredith?

That he never turns down work that pays?

Well, Espio could probably scrap up a few rings.

Vector groaned as he slumped into his office, exhausted from yet another unfruitful stakeout. He'd finally determined that the 'ghost' was gone after turning around a few times and seeing the rice cake unmoved, and it only concluded another failed mission. Why was this so hard? He'd expected this case to be easy money but it was turning out to seem nearly impossible. He wasn't one to give up, but he was certainly feeling the tax.

"Come on, just give me a break already!" He pleaded to no one in particular, angrily kicking a chair. "This case should've been over a while ago! How is this so hard? I just need *something*… a clue… a tip… heck, maybe just a little bit of luck—"

Two sharp knocks rang out from his door and he froze, glancing over with a sudden increase in his heartbeats. Was that… a knock? For him? Maybe a client? Something else? He paused for a few more moments, but no more sound came. Straightening his chain, he stood up and made his way to the door before opening it. "You've reached Vector the Crocodile, Chaotix Detective Agency. How may I assist…" Vector swallowed up the rest of his speech when he didn't immediately see anyone, taking a moment to register that he needed to look lower.

Way lower.

A small, scrawny purple chameleon stared up at him formally, and Vector frowned. "Uh… heya kid. What can I help ya with? And where are your parents—"

"Greetings, Sir." The young Mobian spoke up, voice round and slightly accented. "I am here to report a missing person, and would very much like to inquire if it is indeed true that you accept any form and amount of pay?"

"Well, yeah technically, but what—"

"Wonderful. Here is a young bee that I found in an alleyway." He said bluntly, picking up a box from next to him and handing it to a shocked Vector, who bewilderedly took it. "I am uncertain of his exact age, however on the way here I could detect certain enunciations that implied a fragile background in speech and his wings also look fairly healthy. Unfortunately I do not have much to offer at this particular moment, but I'm certain I could acquire some form of compensation—"

"Yeah yeah, slow your roll, kid." Vector lifted the flap of the cardboard box and almost jumped in disbelief when he indeed found a small bee inside. "Great Gaia! Where the heck did ya find a stranded baby?"

"My apologies if I wasn't clear, but I found him in the alley across Sunset City." The chameleon told him formally, and Vector's eyes narrowed. Who the heck was this kid? He looked no older than eleven… twelve if he was pushing it. He was speaking with larger words than Vector ever cared to use and… and why did he look so scrawny and banged up? There were cuts and bruises littering his body all over and Vector could even see his ribs peeking through around the heart pattern on his chest. He took a deep breath and gave him a suspicious look.

"Alright, what's goin' on here? Where are your parents?" Vector asked, and the chameleon stiffened.

”I did not mean to convey that I am in need of service, and my deepest apologies if I miscommunicated. I only intended to make this child known to you so that you might be able to locate his guardians or obtain new ones if it should come to that.” The chameleon began, and Vector sighed.

”Okay, but ya gotta at least give me a name to work with.” Vector quickly backtracked when the kid’s eyes narrowed. “Just to put at the top of my file report! It’s nothin’ serious. Unless ya want me to keep callin’ ya ‘kid’.”

”An understandable request.” The Mobian acknowledged, but still he hesitated. Vector began to feel a bit impatient and more than a little uneasy. Where had this kid spawned from? Did his parents care that he was in such a rough condition?

Did he even have parents *to* care?

”Well? Do ya gotta name?” Vector finally prodded a bit, and the chameleon looked away.

”…Espio.” He finally said, and Vector nodded.

”Espio? That’ll do.” He offered a weak yet encouraging smile, peeking into the box again to see a little paper stapled to the bee’s chest that read ‘CHARMY’ in sloppy letters. Vector let out an amused grunt. “And it looks like the mystery baby is Charmy.” The bee repeated the name sloppily with a giggle and Vector’s eyes softened slightly. Who on earth would abandon this child to an alleyway?

”I am aware of the fact.” Espio said simply. “Now if you wouldn’t mind, I do need to take my leave but I will return with whatever rings I can save up—“

”Hold it right there, kid.” Vector sighed, and Espio stiffened. “Ya really think I’m just gonna let you walk out into the streets again without checkin’ around first? Are your folks around? Do they treat you right?”

”That information is simply not relevant, and it is intrusive for you to ask for such private details about my life. This is strictly a business encounter.” Espio told him, and Vector struggled to refrain from rolling his eyes.

”If you were an adult, maybe. But you’re not, and kids your age shouldn’t be fending for themselves.” Vector narrowed his eyes.

”’Kids my age’? I’m ten years old.” Espio told him with a scoff, as if that should be some valid point in their argument, but it only made Vector’s stomach drop.

”…Ten?” The crocodile spluttered. “Gaia, where the heck are your parents? Who on earth is letting a ten-year-old wander around by himself?”

”My parental figures’ whereabouts are none of your concern.” Espio repeated firmly. “This discussion is at an end. Please take good precautions when it comes to the outcome of Charmy—“

”What… no we’re not done talking about this!” Vector began, but Espio shot him a glare.

”Yes, we are.” He replied, and with that he disappeared.

Vector blinked. It was the strangest thing, seeing someone simply fade from sight. He looked around desperately, straining his ears but hearing nothing. It was as if the scrawny kid had vanished from existence, and he just couldn’t quite understand it. “Hey, Espio? Where’d ya go, kid? Hello?”

He heard nothing else and sighed, staring down at the bee in the box. It looked up at him innocently, wings flapping with energy. “Well… I guess I’ve gotta figure out what to do with you next. Heck, this is adding up to be the weirdest day of my—” Vector froze, the pieces finally clicking in his head. Had… had that really happened?

A scrawny, underfed chameleon kid wearing clunky boots who had the ability to vanish from sight without a trace or a sound?

Had he really found his ghost?

He quickly turned tail and hurried back into his office, gently setting the box next to his chair before pulling up various research tabs on his computer regarding young bee care and chameleon mobians.

It was time to prepare.

Chapter End Notes

Whelp, looks like Charmy has entered the scene! And Vector has finally found his ghost… now catching that ghost might be a bit more tricky but our optimistic detective isn’t one to give up! Whatever he decides, it has to feel like Espio’s choice or else it’ll never work for the stubborn purple boi :3

Next chapter out Saturday, so see ya then! :D

Chapter 14: The Storm

Chapter Summary

> ”Heya kid…” Vector said slowly, sidling into the back woods behind Meredith’s house. The old mountain goat was watching him with an unamused look.
>
> ”When are ya gonna give it up? You know that my ghost isn’t the sociable type!” She shouted after him. “Just let it get it’s dinner in peace!”

Chapter Notes

> Hey everyone, and welcome back to another chapter of The Art of Espionage! Let’s see how Vector reacts now that he knows who his ghost is… :D
>
> As always comments and kudos are greatly appreciated and I hope you enjoy! ^^

See the end of the chapter for more notes

”Heya kid…” Vector said slowly, sidling into the back woods behind Meredith’s house. The old mountain goat was watching him with an unamused look.

”When are ya gonna give it up? You know that my ghost isn’t the sociable type!” She shouted after him. “Just let it get it’s dinner in peace!”

”Definitely not sociable, but also not a ghost.” Vector raised his voice slightly. “Isn’t that right, Espio?”

”Espio?” Hank scrunched up his face. “Did you figure something out?”

”I think so. Call it a stroke of luck.” He sat down in his usual spot next to the window. “I had a nice neighbor lady give me some old baby equipment from when she was raising her kids, so Charmy is all set. Thought you’d like to know.”

Silence. Vector hesitated, realizing that he didn’t quite know if Espio was even here yet. He glanced over at the rice cake in slight embarrassment, sighing and averting his eyes. What if Espio didn’t even want to come back here after revealing himself? He had to be clever to last as long as he had on his own. What if he was somewhere else?

”You uh… you said that your neighbors have been reporting a pest problem, right?” Vector cleared his throat, and Hank nodded.

”Yeah, why?” He asked.

”Well I think our little non-ghost friend might try to—“ He began, but stopped when his eyes met the empty windowsill. His lips quirked up in a smirk as he looked around. “Ah, so ya did show up! Good to see you again! Or, well, *not* see you again…”

”Okay, what’s going on?” Hank’s eyes darted around the forest. “I still can’t see anyone. Did you catch the thief or not?”

Vector hesitated before lowering his voice and leaning in. “Don’t be mad, but I don’t think it would do any good to ‘catch’ this guy.”

”What do you mean? If he’s stealing then he belongs in jail!” Hank crossed his arms. “Or at least needs to stop.”

”He’s a kid.” Vector whispered back. “He’s ten.”

Hank blinked. “Ten? As in, years old?”

”Well I certainly don’t mean seconds.” Vector rolled his eyes.

”Not even a teenager? Where are his parents?” Hank looked back out at the forest, the irritated expression morphing into uncertainty. “You’re sure about this?”

”He wouldn’t tell me where his parents were, but I’m pretty sure they’re not in the picture. He’s really rough for wear and underfed—we just need to get him somewhere safe until we can figure out a guardian. Right now his small thefts are the least of our problems.” Vector replied. “I doubt he’d be open to the idea of a guardian or foster care, and if he’s in this condition then I don’t think his parents deserve any ‘world’s best’ mugs.” Raising his voice again he made sure to enunciate his words. “I heard there’s a big storm coming tonight, but personally I love the sound of rain. Don’t you agree, Mr. Hank?”

Hank blinked. “Uh… yeah I guess it’s kinda nice.”

”Exactly!” Vector resisted the urge to look around. “So guess I’m gonna keep the upstairs window of my agency with a large tree next to it open tonight. It’s a nice, quiet little room with no one living in it.”

Understanding dawned on Hank’s face. “Oh, that sounds like a good idea. A little ambience noice that’s not directly in your room but somewhere close by.”

“What does the rain have to do with my ghost?” Meredith wondered aloud, and Vector glanced at her sharply.

”Nothing at all, ma’am. And even though I’m sure our little friend is listening around here somewhere, I’m going to head back to the office before the storm hits. I might be a crocodile but I still would like a nice, dry home to go back to when it rains.” He turned away, finally allowing himself a glance at the surrounding trees as he walked away, hoping that his research on chameleons would pay off in the supplies he’d bought earlier that day. It

might've been a bit more than his budget allowed, but he was certain that it'd be worth it if it helped out this kid. "Have a good day, Ma'am. And best wishes to you too, Espio."

Espio shivered slightly, pressing himself against the trunk of a tree and wishing away the pouring rain that was soaking him. He wasn't an idiot—he knew that Vector knew what he was doing, offering a room like that. But *accepting* help rather than taking it felt like an act of weakness, and he refused to feel that way again.

Overpowered.

Helpless.

Worthless.

At least Charmy was safe though, even if Espio still had to figure out a way to pay Vector for his services. Another crack of lightning made him jump slightly, making himself as small as he could in the crook of the tree. He waited a few seconds, bracing himself for the boom of thunder that soon followed and rattled his bones. A room did sound kind of nice right about now… somewhere dry and warm…

He shook himself. No, he couldn't think about that. He was a ninja! He could handle any situation and had weathered many storms before. He hated every one of them, but he also knew that they would pass.

Very, *very* slowly.

The purple chameleon could feel every single second in agonizing detail—every patter of rain, every droplet rolling down his face, every shiver that ran through his body. Gaia did he hate these ridiculous storms! Logically he reminded himself that they nourished the earth and were a necessary part of the lush foliage around him, but he still felt miserable trying to balance on a slippery branch and attempting to keep warm. Wanting to accept Vector's offer just proved that he was getting soft; he'd already grown too accustomed to the crocodile's presence after a week and allowed himself to question whether or not there were actually decent people in the world wanting to help. Well, maybe not *good* people, but perhaps neutral until triggered. It was ridiculous! Everyone was just moping around the planet trying to find a purpose in life and striving to be loved by others even if it meant getting hurt and rejected time and time again. He shivered and glanced down at his gloved hands tightly gripping the branch. Why would anyone love him? Why would anyone even *like* him after they got to know him? All Vector's offer was was a charity case out of pity for the scrawny chameleon out on his own, and he refused to be treated that way.

But maybe… maybe it wasn't technically *accepting* help if the window happened to be open, and at least it was predictable. Vector had already proven himself to be an unworthy opponent, and even though he was larger he was also unable to sense his movements when invisible and seemed very gentle and compassionate with his initiative regarding Charmy. The crocodile would never even have to know he was there! He would slip in silently, wait out the storm in an invisible vigil, and then leave without a trace. Vector would never have to witness his weakness, and at the very least he could check in on Charmy to ensure the

crocodile was being truthful. He could think of it as a mission—yes, perfect. A mission to protect Charmy and observe his enemy.

With a nod Espio began to shift his weight on the branch, reaching for a good hold to climb down. The slippery bark betrayed his balance, however, and with a gasp he was sent crashing to the forest floor, hissing at the sharp pain of landing on his foot wrong. He lay there for a few moments, breathing hard and flushing in embarrassment before slowly standing up and trying to avoid his throbbing ankle. He took a deep breath, knowing that he deserved the pain as punishment for his pathetic mistake of slipping on that branch.

With fresh resolve he slowly made his way out of the forest, invisibly heading into town and appreciating how the harsh weather kept most of the people indoors. The sidewalks and streets were practically abandoned, save for the occasional car that rushed past and splashed him in cold, murky water when it's tires hit a puddle. He would've dodged but at this point was too tired to, feeling the combined effects of the dipping temperatures and his injured ankle. Instead he trudged on, navigating his way around the now-familiar city until he came across the tall, lanky building that he knew to be the Chaotix Detective Agency.

As per Vector's not-instructions, he circled around to the back and eyed the old tree that sure enough reached to the second-floor window. Normally scaling the tree would be no problem, but right now he was lethargic and hurt. Perhaps he could…

Espio shook his head. What in chaos was he thinking? He was a ninja! Failure could not be an option considered in his head, as success began in the mind. He closed his eyes and envisioned himself reaching the window, nodding resolutely and beginning his climb.

Sure enough he soon crawled through the opening and immediately felt the change in temperature. Further inspection revealed a small heat lamp in the corner of the small area, doing its best to keep up with the cold outside. Espio felt a surge of relief as he limped towards it, finally allowing himself to collapse in front of the blissful beam of light and curling up to preserve body warmth. A brief consideration that Vector had placed the lamp in there on purpose crossed his mind, but everything felt so heavenly compared to the freezing rain outside that he didn't linger on the thought. He could perhaps visit Charmy later… after he warmed up a bit…

But he was asleep within seconds.

Vector finally cracked the door open, hearing soft, slow breathing coming from inside. He glanced around the heated room for any sign of Espio, at first seeing nothing but then noticing some wet footprints leading right up to the heat lamp he'd placed, a puddle forming in front of it. He smiled slightly, eyes softening at the sight of flickering scales attempting to hold on to invisibility but relaxing as the chameleon's slumber deepened. Even if he ran in the morning, at least Vector could sleep knowing that the kid would rest well tonight. Besides, the chameleon needed this to be his choice or else he'd never accept any help.

With a nod, he set down a small bag of food just inside before closing the door softly and walking away.

Chapter End Notes

YEAHHHH HOORAY FOR VECTOR AND ESPIO!! At least Es will get a warm room… but how will he react after a good night of sleep and once he gets back to his senses?

Next chapter out Tuesday, so see ya then! :D

Chapter 15: A New Detective In Town

Chapter Summary

Espio stirred slightly, the warmth around him attempting to lull him back to sleep. He shifted a bit closer to the heat source, bliss filling his mind as he rested…

He gasped and sat bolt upright, nerves on high alert. How could he have let himself sleep in? How could he have let himself *sleep* in the first place? Where even was he?

Chapter Notes

Hey everyone! Happy Chaotix Tuesday, and welcome back to a new chapter! Let's see how Es feels now that he's gotten a good night of sleep…

As always comments and kudos are greatly appreciated, and I hope you enjoy! :D

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Espio stirred slightly, the warmth around him attempting to lull him back to sleep. He shifted a bit closer to the heat source, bliss filling his mind as he rested…

He gasped and sat bolt upright, nerves on high alert. How could he have let himself sleep in? How could he have let himself *sleep* in the first place? Where even was he?

The events of last night came flooding back to him as he looked around the small room, window still open and a slight drizzle still lingering outside. He watched the rain for a few moments, the sound of gentle pattering soothing his frazzled mind. He was… safe. It came almost as a surprise, as he hadn't slept indoors for many months and the home he had known before that wasn't exactly comforting.

Practical and functional?

Yes.

But tense with the knowledge that anyone could come for him—perhaps even to hurt him—at any moment?

Also yes.

When was the last time he'd been able to wake up slow like this? No one else was present and he wasn't in immediate danger of being discovered. It felt… nice. Being able to simply

look around while absorbing the warmth of the heater, waiting for his mind to grow accustomed to this new state of consciousness. But it wasn't something to get used to, and he knew he couldn't linger there. He just needed to check up on Charmy and—

Espio blinked, seeing a slightly-crumpled paper bag sitting innocently by the door. That… hadn't been there last night, to his memory. Had someone snuck in? He knew he'd slept hard but not *that* hard! What kind of a ninja was he? With a grimace he slowly started to stand before crying out and falling down again as his ankle gave way. He hissed and grabbed his leg, willing the pain to stop. Biting his tongue and chiding himself for his exclamation, the chameleon slowly crawled over to the bag like some pathetic little worm. However he couldn't hear any footsteps approaching so perhaps he'd gotten lucky.

Peering into the bag he sucked in a sharp breath, eyes narrowing hungrily at the sight of various food containers. There was some noodles, some Mongolian beef, a few fortune cookies… did Vector enjoy this type of food as well? Espio didn't even care at this point, primal instincts overpowering his dignity as he began to devour the rations greedily.

The food was soon gone, and before Espio knew it he was scrounging around the bottom of the bag in a vain hope that something would be left. Upon finding nothing he sighed and set it aside, feeling a bit more satisfied than he had in a long time. But it didn't come without guilt, as the realization was starting to set in that it was likely Vector who had provided this meal. So now he had to pay the detective for taking care of Charmy, offering him shelter *and* food? A few rings could likely be acquired on the side of the street, but not *that* many!

What did that crocodile want from him?

And how could he have been so foolish to accept all of this debt?

Espio grimaced, realizing that his act was up. He was no longer anonymous but had someone who not only knew what he looked like, but also who had provided him with services the chameleon couldn't afford. How on earth would he pay Vector back? Besides that, his ankle wasn't in any condition to aid him in climbing down the tree now that adrenaline had worn off. He could definitely try, but what would happen when he came back to repay Vector? Of course he could just disappear from the crocodile's life, but how could he live with himself knowing that someone out there thought he was some weakling without honor? Ninjas could face the hard truths and own up to their mistakes.

There was no use in hiding anymore.

Espio sighed and pushed himself up, limping towards the door.

The moment he opened it he hesitated, not liking the unfamiliar territory. A rickety banister greeted him, and to his left was a narrow staircase that led down to an open living room and an office with the door cracked. To his right was another doorway which the chameleon presumed to be Vector's room, but the light coming from that office indicated occupation. With a deep breath he hobbled over to the stairs and started to make his way down them.

Creeeeeeack!

Espio gasped at the sudden sound, startling away and tripping over the uneven step he was on. He toppled down the last few steps, biting back a hiss as he hit the wall separating himself from the office. Vector was out in an instant, kneeling next to him worriedly. “Espio! Are you alright?”

”I’m… fine…” Espio grit out, flinching away from Vector’s hands and watching the crocodile hesitate in confusion. “My apologies. I was unaware of the precariously unstable configuration of the stairs.”

”Yeah, heh, I’d get it fixed but don’t really have the cash right now.” Vector frowned as Espio started to get up, favoring his right ankle. “Hey—are you hurt?”

”It happened before I entered this particular building. It is of no concern to you.” Espio replied, trying to salvage what was left of his dignity as he stood up as straight as he could. “I wish you many pleasantries this day and would like to discuss as to how I might repay you for your services. The rations were… much appreciated.”

”Um… good morning to you too.” Vector hesitated, eyes softening as he also got up. “And there’s really no need to pay me back. Call it a favor.”

”Unless that is a synonym for ‘debt’ then I am not interested in softening the reality.” Espio told him firmly, and Vector blinked. “I am no beggar and am prepared to go to whatever extent it takes to reimburse you for your services.”

”Oh! I… uh…” Vector swallowed hard, eyes briefly flicking around the various bruises and cuts littering Espio’s body. The chameleon lifted his chin, trying to maintain an air of professionalism. “Honestly I was happy to help.”

”I am in no need of charity. However an exchange is reasonable—assistance for compensation.”

Vector shook his head in disbelief, clearly at a loss. “Well…”

”My apologies for the intrusion. I understand that it is early and perhaps not the most convenient time to pressure you for an answer.” Espio turned and began to hobble towards the door. “I will return later with rings and whatever else I can acquire.”

”WAIT!” Vector cried, and Espio stiffened, turning around with an expectant eye. Vector hesitated, flushing slightly. “Well… uh… it’s still raining out there, and you’re hurt! You sure you don’t wanna stay a bit longer? I’ve got some leftovers in the fridge if you’re still hungry…”

”You’ve done more than enough, and given your hospitality I am reassured that Charmy is in good hands.” Espio glanced over towards the office. “Is he in there?”

”Oh—yes he’s doing just fine! He’s sleeping right now, but that little guy kept me up most of the night.” Vector chuckled weakly.

”My apologies for the hinderance to your slumber, and I can assure you that I will pay you back for your services.” Espio turned to leave again, only to have Vector pipe up from behind him.

”Wait! You… uh… you know, I could probably use some help with Charmy.” Vector told him, and Espio stiffened. “And that disappearing trick you have? Why, it’s one of the most impressive things I’ve seen in my life!”

”Your flattery has no effect on me. What is your point?” Espio asked bluntly, and Vector cleared his throat.

”If ya… well… if ya want you could maybe help me out around the agency for a bit.” Vector quickly raised his hands in surrender as Espio began to protest. “Just for a bit! You could stay in that upstairs room and work here as a junior detective in the meantime. Consider it a form of payment. What do ya say?”

”Work… here?” Espio tilted his head.

”Yeah! Ya know, most adults get jobs in exchange for rings so they can afford food and rent and stuff like that. That’s how we get paid.” Vector explained. “I wouldn’t mind if ya… worked here if ya really want to pay me back.”

Espio hesitated. He could tell that Vector was likely just trying to throw him a bone, but the request wasn’t unreasonable. Services in exchange for services? Not to mention a roof over his head and food in his belly? He’d also be able to look after Charmy… but of course he had to remember that it would all be temporary. He would stay until his debt was paid and then go out once again on his own. His eyes narrowed as he glanced at Vector’s outstretched hand. “No strings attached?”

”None at all!” Vector chirped.

”And *only* until my debt to you is repaid?”

”You betcha.”

”And you won’t attempt to trap or imprison me?”

”Consider yourself free as a flicky.”

Espio hesitated a few more moments before finally nodding and shaking Vector’s hand. “Then I would be honored to work alongside you.”

Vector grinned. “Likewise.”

Vector watched in complete bafflement as Espio sorted through his bills, occasionally asking for clarification on various words but otherwise working in silence. It had been a couple of hours since the kid was officially hired, and Vector wanted to give him a simple job to start off with since he insisted on starting work right away. What better task than to simply place the wayward papers in a stack? But the moment Espio started on the task he began to actually

organize them and figure out the sums of the bills. The crocodile watched in bewilderment as the familiar mess slowly morphed into order, having only offered Espio the job to keep him at the agency until he could figure something out and not having expected him to actually help. “You, uh, sure you know what you’re doing there?”

”It is nothing more than simple math and efficient organization.” The chameleon replied. “I am glad to offer my services and am familiar enough with the English lexicon and numerical symbols so that I can perform effectively.”

”Right. Well…” Vector glanced at the clock. “It’s getting kinda late, you wanna call it a day? You’ve already done more in these past few hours than I’ve done in months!”

”I am more than capable of continuing on.” Espio gestured to the various stacks around him. “Everything here was in an abysmal state of disarray and will hinder our focus on any new work. I will finish.”

”Well can I at least make us some dinner?” Vector tried, a bit bewildered at how quickly this young kid adapted to his new role in the agency. Sure living alone for Gaia knows how long would give him an impressive amount of mental flexibility, but it was uncanny of someone his age. Espio glanced up, hesitating slightly.

”I do not believe that I have done enough to deserve a meal yet.” He replied, turning back to his work as Vector’s jaw dropped. “I will let you know when I am done with this task.”

”Deserve a… Es, you don’t have to earn food from me.” He took a tentative step forward, eyes creasing in concern. “I’m not some Dr. Eggman, you know. You can eat anytime ya want.”

”I am unfamiliar with that metaphor, and I apologize.” Espio looked up at him over the top of his papers warily, a question in those golden eyes.

”You haven’t heard of Dr. Eggman yet? Mustachioed weirdo trying to take over the planet?” Vector sighed. “Well, it just means that I’m not so cruel as to try to keep food from you. If you’re gonna work here then I’m gonna take care of ya.” A whimper came from the cradle in the corner and Vector glanced over. “And I’m gonna take care of Charmy. I just finished making a honey mixture for him and then I’m gonna make some canned soup or something. Do you want any? And I don’t wanna hear anything about if ya deserve it or not because ya do.”

Espio hesitated slightly, watching Vector closely as if waiting for the other shoe to drop. When the crocodile only looked at him expectantly he cleared his throat. “I… would like that. Thank you.”

Vector nodded and left the room, stomach rolling at the idea of someone keeping food from a *child* because they hadn’t done enough.

Where in chaos had Espio come from?

Chapter End Notes

YEAHHHH THE CHAOTIX ARE TOGETHER FINALLY!!! :DDD But hopefully poor Es will learn to warm up more… Vector just wants him to feel safe TvT

Next chapter out Thursday (most likely lol) so see ya then! ^^

Chapter 16: Unwanted

Chapter Summary

> *Kaito's stomach rolled as he stumbled back, hot, sticky blood dripping from his hands. In one fist he gripped a dirtied kunai, Mugai choking and gagging out morbid sounds caused by the attempt to scream from a carved-out throat.*
>
> *He'd done it.*
>
> *He killed his brother.*

Chapter Notes

> Hey everyone, and welcome back to a new chapter! Let's see how the first morning of the Chaotix team goes! :3
>
> ▶ Minor TW spoilers below!
>
> Thank you all so much for your support, and as always comments and kudos are greatly appreciated <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Kaito's stomach rolled as he stumbled back, hot, sticky blood dripping from his hands. In one fist he gripped a dirtied kunai, Mugai choking and gagging out morbid sounds caused by the attempt to scream from a carved-out throat.

He'd done it.

He killed his brother.

"Well done, Kaito." Kuroshi came up from behind, placing a hand on the young chameleon's shoulder and squeezing hard. "Now you're just like me."

"Like he wants to be like you, Kuro!" Riku spat, tail flicking in agitation. "Like anyone would ever want to follow your leadership! Look what you've done!"

Kuroshi's grip tightened, and Kaito flinched as his nails began to dig into his scales. "We all become who raised us. It is inevitable. One might try to redirect a tree's direction with posts and trimming, but it all sprouts from the same roots and grows the same fruit."

”I didn’t mean to…” Kaito mumbled, but cried out as his father’s hand began to grow white hot, searing his shoulder and branding the scar into his flesh.

”Oh Kaito, don’t you remember what happens to the weak?” Kuroshi asked darkly. “Ketsu tried to save you and look where that ended him! Then Mugai betrayed us and you showed him the consequences. They are dead because of you.”

”I didn’t!” Kaito tried to squirm away from his father’s burning grip but couldn’t escape. What was happening to him? He didn’t… he would never kill his brother, right? But he did and… and he needed to get over it… be a ninja…

”Stop struggling, Kaito!” Kuroshi scowled. “I taught you better than to defy me! You can never escape me, you know. You can run all you want, try to change your ways or find a new life or a new name, but I will forever *be a part of you.”*

”It’s not true!” Kaito cried, wide eyes staring at the black spot Kuroshi’s grip had left behind.

Dark as his father’s own scales.

He tried desperately to scrub off the mark with his free hand, but to his horror a fire spread to his fingers and quickly raced up his arm as the chameleon tried to escape the flames. He fell to the ground in agony, watching as his father looked down on him in disappointment. “I thought you learned your lesson, Kaito, but it appears that I was mistaken. You were never supposed to exist, and because of your inability to step up and be a leader our entire village is scattered. You can try to flee the shame, but you will never escape me.”

”Kaito, help!” Screamed a voice, and Kaito instantly recognized it as Yuki. “Please! Help me! Kaito!”

”Yuki? Where are you?” Kaito choked out, writing in pain and trying to get up. “I can’t see you!”

”I hope you’re happy!” Came another resentful voice that belonged to Ketsu, and Kaito flinched. “I hope that you get the future that I never had! I hope that in abandoning all of us you can find some sort of closure!”

”I’m sorry!” Kaito screamed, curling up in a ball. “I’m sorry I’m sorry I failed you all I’m sorry—“

”SORRY WON’T CHANGE THE TRUTH!” Chorused all five voices of his father, uncle, brothers and guardian. “You failed your one purpose in life! Who could ever love you like this? Broken and pitiful and weak—“

”I don’t know what you want me to do…” Kaito almost whispered as the voices echoed louder and louder, blocking out everything else with their taunting cacophony.

”YOU FAILED! YOU FAILED US ALL!”

Espio sat bolt upright, tail curling around himself as his heart hammered and he looked around the softly-lit room to try to regain his senses.

No one was coming for him.

It was just a nightmare.

Don't react don't react don't react…

Espio took a deep breath, closing his eyes and letting the air fill his lungs. Feelings never lasted forever and these too would pass. He just needed to… well…

The chameleon frowned. Right, he was in the Chaotix agency. There was his heat lamp that cast the room in a warm glow, there was the window he had crawled through the other night, there was the door that led to the stairwell… it was all predictable and stable. He had a strange sense at waking up in the same, comfortable place twice but didn't think too much of it. Now that he was awake he needed to do something productive, perhaps organize some more of the office? Yeah, that sounded good.

He just needed to pass the time before he was given a task by his new boss.

Vector yawned, rolling over in his bed and nuzzling into his pillow. He always loved these solitary mornings, being able to wake up slow to the sound of birdsong and the murmuring banter of tourists trying to see as much of the city as they could in one brief vacation. Here he was living on the edge—alone and on the down-low. At least there was never any shouting or arguing or anything and he could just relax and—

Crash!

Vector shot up like a spring, heart hammering as his bleary vision took in the empty cradle in the corner of the room and the sounds of babbling and shouting downstairs.

So much for alone.

But speaking of…

"Charmy!" Vector stumbled out of bed and flew to the door, hurrying downstairs before his brain could even fully comprehend that he was awake. He stiffened slightly, seeing the little bee crawling speedily around and occasionally lifting slightly off the ground with his wings as Espio dove to grab him. A pot Vector had left on the stove from yesterday was now on the ground, presumably the source of the crash. The chameleon finally managed to grab the young bee's leg and held him up in vexation, Charmy giggling and swinging upside down.

"Greetings, Vector, and my apologies for the disruption." The chameleon told him. "I do believe that I was mistaken about Charmy's age and capabilities and am now realizing that with the proper nourishment he has regained his strength."

"Eh, it's not your fault, Es. None of us have any way of knowing how old he really is." Vector yawned and trudged forward, adrenaline wearing off and causing him to realize how

early in the morning it was. He gently took Charmy and held him in the crook of his arm, the bee nuzzling his little head into Vector's bicep and letting out a few sleepy sounds. Vector chuckled and gave him the pacifier clipped to his pajamas. "Oh so now you're tired? But what're ya doing up so early, Espio? You look more awake then both of us combined."

"A ninja is born in the darkness to live in the darkness." Espio turned away, putting some of the chairs in Vector's rickety dining set back in place. "We thrive in the night and do not waste away our solitude."

Vector perked up slightly, eyeing the ten-year old in curiosity. "A ninja? Like in that new movie?" Images of children's shows and action figures ran through his head, but Espio glanced over at him with a look of distaste.

"Movie? I am unfamiliar with that word, but I meant that I am trained in the art of ninjitsu." The chameleon informed him.

"Riiiight." Vector tried to keep his doubts at bay. This was normal for children! Heck, when he was a kid he could imagine he was an astronaut or a rock singer! At least this was the most usual, childlike trait Espio portrayed, and Vector should indulge in the fantasy to hopefully help Espio feel at home. "That's neat! I mean, I knew you could turn in visible and fight and stuff, but this is even cooler. Who's your favorite ninja?"

"My… favorite ninja?" Espio frowned.

"Yeah! Like you know, who do you look up to?" Vector asked, thinking back to all the detective shows that inspired him growing up. "I haven't seen many ninja films honestly, but I'm sure you're the expert! So who's your favorite ninja that you look up to the most?"

Espio hesitated. "…Yuki." He turned away quickly, and Vector hesitated.

"Is that… like… someone from a comic? A show?" Vector prodded, trying to make conversation, but at that moment Charmy giggled and threw his pacifier, which he had somehow managed to get unclipped. Espio straightened and immediately turned around with lightning speed, withdrawing a small knife from his boot and throwing it to catch the clip and spear into the wall next to the stairwell. Vector's jaw dropped, and Espio calmly went over to pry the weapon from the wood and withdraw the dangling pacifier. Charmy clapped his hands and babbled excitedly as the chameleon returned it, carefully placing the knife back in his large boot. Vector spluttered. "What… wait… where in chaos did ya get a knife?!"

"I… acquired it." Espio turned away. "Along with some other necessities that I have moved to my room while I waited for you to wake up."

"There's… more?" Vector couldn't stop the image of a child throwing a knife with pinpoint accuracy from replaying in his mind. That… wasn't a coincidence. No one could use a blade like that unless they had been trained. And now there were more weapons hidden in the chameleon's room? Vector hesitated, realizing that Espio might not have been kidding about being a ninja.

The pieces started falling into place. "So… who is Yuki? Is she a part of your family?"

”I do not wish to discuss this further.” Espio said firmly. “This conversation is at an end.”

”An energetic baby, a knife throwing kid.” Vector mumbled to himself as he made his way to Meredith and Hank’s front door. “An energetic baby, and a knife throwing, ninja kid…”

”Oh it’s the gumshoe.” Came Meredith’s huff, and Vector looked up, shifting his weight anxiously as he was starting to regret his decision to leave his two charges at home. From now on he should really make sure to keep an eye on them until he could get ahold of an adoption agency to see what the procedure was for returning lost children. Geez that sounded to cold… but what else could he do? “What do you want, Mr. Crocodile? And what did you do to my ghost?”

”Greetings, Ma’am!” Vector told her politely. “I was just stopping by to…”

”Yeah yeah, Hank left this check for you.” Meredith grumbled, handing the crocodile an envelope. “Guess you cracked the case, huh? My ghost hasn’t shown up here for—“

”I know, I know. That’s because he’s been staying with me the past two nights.” Vector explained, and Meredith blinked. “That’s right—he’s not a ghost. Turns out he was just a kid living on his own and trying to eat. That’s what I was tellin’ your grandson that night.”

”…You don’t say.” Meredith muttered, eyes narrowing. “And you’re sure it’s my ghost?”

”Yep!” Vector tried to keep the conversation short, really wanting to move along with his money so that he could get some more food to feed his—oh great Gaia, was he already thinking of them as his responsibility? Well, sure they were, but only until he could figure out his next steps. “He’s a chameleon, so he can turn invisible which is why you never saw him. And um… yeah apparently he’s a ninja or somethin’ which explains why we could never hear him or anything as well. He’s a sneaky little fellow, heh.”

”… How young are we talking?” She asked, and Vector hesitated.

”He’s ten.”

”And he was just tryin’ to get a meal?”

”Yes.”

”Where are his parents?”

”Not sure. I think he’s alone.”

”And who’s takin’ care of him now?”

”Well, I guess I am temporarily.”

”You?” Meredith scoffed. “You’re just a little spring chicken. How do you plan to take care of a kid? I doubt you’ve ever had one of your own.”

”I’ll figure it out!” Vector straightened, lifting his chin. “I’m a detective, you forget! I can manage any situation—“

”Yeah yeah, hold your horses.” Meredith muttered, waddling back inside and shutting the door in his face. Vector grimaced in irritation, foot tapping impatiently. Finally she opened the door again, shoving an old basket into his arms. “Here ya go. Thank me later.”

”What…” Vector froze when he opened the flap of the basket, seeing a bunch of rice cakes and seaweed inside.

”A growing boy needs to eat.” She huffed. “This was some of the stuff that I had planned for the days he didn’t show up. I don’t have much since I gave away all my old toys and supplies to my children and grandchildren, but remember to keep an eye on him. He needs to eat properly and stay hydrated and be given chances to be a kid. Y’know, explore and imagine and stuff.”

”Oh.” Vector blinked, taken aback. “Well, thank you—“

”Don’t thank me yet.” Meredith rolled her eyes. “A growing boy also needs to know that he’s cared for. You’re a role model now, got that? He’s gonna be watching you. Kids always watch their fathers more than they realize.”

”Woah, I’m not his father—“ Vector began, but Meredith scowled.

”Oh pish posh. You better treat my ghost right, you hear me?” She turned away. “Maybe he’ll get a new family through an adoption center or whatever, but you’d better go about that carefully. One of the worst things you can do to a child is make them feel unloved or unwanted, and that’s the truth.”

Chapter End Notes

Well Vector, even Meredith agrees that you’ve now become a father of two lol XD

Next chapter out Saturday, so see ya then! :D

Chapter 17: A Flying Baby

Chapter Summary

> ”Vector! The phone is ringing.” Came Espio’s call and Vector hesitated, fumbling slightly with the honey bottle in his one hand and Charmy resting in his other arm. The baby whimpered slightly in impatience and reached for the bottle, Vector gasping and trying to regain balance.

Chapter Notes

> Hey everyone, and welcome to a new chapter! Looks like our trio is about to get a call… we’ll see how this goes! :3
>
> As always comments and kudos are greatly appreciated and I hope you enjoy! ^^

See the end of the chapter for more notes

”Vector! The phone is ringing.” Came Espio’s call and Vector hesitated, fumbling slightly with the honey bottle in his one hand and Charmy resting in his other arm. The baby whimpered slightly in impatience and reached for the bottle, Vector gasping and trying to regain balance.

“I’ll be there in a second, Es!” Vector replied before grimacing and trying to prevent Charmy from squirming out of his arms. “You’re feisty for someone so young, you know that? How old even are ya? Come to think of it, bees are already small in general so maybe you’re a bit more developed than I—HEY STOP!” Vector gasped as Charmy giggled and freed himself, tiny wings barely managing to keep him in the air. The crocodile’s jaw dropped. “…Okay, flying baby. I did not expect that.”

”You’ve reached the Chaotix Detective Agency, how may I assist you?” He heard Espio ask, repeating the greeting Vector normally gave but with a more formal script. His stomach dropped.

”Oh great Gaia.” He muttered.

”Gaia!” Charmy chirped.

”Crap!” Vector hissed as he dove for the child, who excitedly buzzed out of the way and strained to fly higher. Panic rose as the crocodile chased him, irritated the limitless energy he seemed to contain. “Come on, Charmy! Throw me a bone and come back, will ya?”

”We do accept any amount of payment for our services, however I think it would benefit us greatly if you honored our time with a higher sum.” Espio continued, and Vector growled under his breath.

”No! We accept *anything*, Espio! That’s what we advertise and we’re kinda desperate here!” He called, once again trying and failing to catch Charmy, who giggled at him.

”My apologies, my boss has informed me that we are desperate and will take absolutely anything.” Espio corrected himself.

”DON’T TELL HIM THAT!” Vector panicked at the unprofessionalism and embarrassment.

”DON ELL ‘M DAT!” Charmy repeated in a mock serious tone.

”It appears I wasn’t supposed to repeat that information in your hearing, so please disregard it.” Espio told him.

”Gah!” Vector made another snatch for Charmy, who happily flew out of the way. “For the love of—Espio, put the caller on hold!” He waited a moment before realizing his mistake, calling out again, “Wait no, politely ask him to wait a few moments and *then* put him on hold!”

”My apologies, but it appears that I will have to place you on a brief hold. Thank you for understanding.” Vector heard the click of the phone being placed back on it’s stand and let out a sigh of relief. However that relief was immediately swallowed up when after a few moments he heard the chameleon’s voice again. “Thank you for holding. Now what were you conversing with me about this case?”

”Es—oh just let me…” Vector finally succeeded in snatching Charmy out of the air, the child giggling as Vector rushed into his office and handed him to Espio, who held him stiffly and awkwardly. “Here, you can hold Charmy while I get all of this settled.” He picked up the phone, clearing his throat as Charmy yawned and leaned against the chameleon, who watched him alertly. “Ahem, my apologies about all of that, but this is Vector the Crocodile, head detective here at the Chaotix. What can I do for you?”

”Um, hello Mr. Crocodile. My name is Larry the Walrus, and as I was telling your young friend I am in a bit of a pickle over here with my friend at work.” The caller told him. “Have you heard the news yet today?”

”Um…” Vector felt a blush creeping over his face. “Well ya see we don’t exactly have cable television at the moment and I’d have to wait until tomorrow morning’s paper to come out —“

”Well I’m sure that you’ve at least heard of the string of building collapses across the city, haven’t you?”

Vector hesitated, realization dawning. “Wait… wait yeah I have actually! It’s the weirdest thing, and I heard that the police are investigating the builders to see if they followed code or something like that. What about it?”

”Well we just had another building come down, and it was at my friend’s retail store.” He explained. “Jason the Lizard. He owns the place and is a best bud of mine.”

Vector frowned. “Okay…?”

”And well… he’s actually been at the site of every building that collapsed and the right time.” Larry told him, and Vector felt his detective heart leap. “So I was just wondering if—“

”You think your friend is the culprit?” Vector announced excitedly, and hesitated when he heard silence on the end. “Erm, my apologies if I got ahead of myself. Please continue.”

”Jason’s the nicest guy I know. Real honest, too, and a great boss. I don’t think he did it, but I’m worried that someone might be after him or something.” Larry informed him. “He keeps claiming that it’s just bad luck or whatever, but the places are too random for it to be coincidence. First it was that old gas station everyone claimed was rickety anyway, but then it was a corporate building during a meeting, then a cafe he went to, then a department store, then a diner, and now this? He’s also been acting… off recently.”

”Well, I would too if every building I set foot in collapsed.” Vector frowned.

”But his behavior goes back until just before the first incident! He started being more snippy towards his employees and acting more jumpy and stuff.” Larry pleaded. “Look I hate to be paranoid or whatever but I’m worried about him. He refuses to talk to the police and doesn’t mention that he was a witness or anything! He’s probably embarrassed, but this time it was so close that one of the falling beams actually took off his tail. He’d be a goner if it wasn’t detachable. Can you help me here? Maybe keep an eye on him or talk to him or something?”

Vector was growing excited. A string of building collapses? A nervous witness? A worried friend? This sounded like his kind of case! “Say no more, the Chaotix are on the case!”

”Thank you! Please hurry over as soon as you can—Jason is here now.” Larry hesitated. “Also, was that a kid I heard on the phone earlier? He’s not actually one of your detectives, right?”

”Um…” Vector glanced over at Espio, who was standing still as a statue as Charmy slept in his arms, unsure of what to do now. What was he supposed to say? That he hired the kid just to keep him off the streets until he could figure something out? “Well, Espio might look young but I can assure you that he’s proven himself to be an excellent junior detective. You can trust us all.”

”Well… okay. As long as it’s just that one kid.” Larry agreed.

”Yep! Just one.” Vector hesitated, eyes flicking to Charmy. “Okay make it two. See ya later!” the crocodile quickly hung up and turned to Espio with an eye ridge raised. “Next time just leave the phone answering to me, got it?”

”Duly noted.” Espio gestured to the phone with the tilt of his head. “So we have acquired a new case?”

”You can bet your boots we did!” Vector grinned. “We gotta head over to that retail store on Fifth Street right away to speak with a witness.”

Espio nodded. “Acceptable. What is your plan regarding Charmy’s care during our investigations?”

”Well we can’t really leave him alone for too long…” Vector frowned. “Maybe there’s a stroller in the stuff the neighbor brought for him?”

”Allow me to check.” Espio handed a sleeping Charmy to Vector before hurrying over to the box in the corner, rifling through it. Vector’s foot tapped impatiently.

”Anything?” He asked hopefully, but his stomach dropped when Espio withdrew a strange bundle of fabric. “Um…”

”I have seen this used in my old village. It is a wraparound cloth to transport young children who cannot walk.” Espio commented, and Vector perked up. Village? What a… strange term. It sounded so foreign to simply saying a ‘town’ or a ‘city’. He walked over and held it out to Vector. “It will be far too large on me, but perhaps it would work on yourself.”

”Wait, what?” Vector’s face flushed again. “Me wear… some sort of baby carrier?”

”Correct.” Espio said simply. “Now hold out your arms.”

Vector hesitated slightly before gritting his teeth and taking a deep breath. This was for a case, he reminded himself, and it was the best they could do on such short notice. Maneuvering Charmy as Espio wrapped the fabric around his upper body, finally the carrier was applied and the chameleon showed him how to snugly fit the little bee inside. Vector nodded. “Oh… okay yeah this works fine. But say, what was it you were saying about your, uh, village? Is it nearby?”

Espio stiffened, guard immediately skyrocketing as he peered up at Vector. His tail flicked. “That information is not relevant, especially now that time is of the essence. Now let’s embark.”

Vector sighed as the chameleon turned away, patting Charmy’s fuzzy head briefly before shrugging. “Eh, it was worth a shot.”

Chapter End Notes

Whelp it looks like the Chaotix have their first case! Rn it might be a ragtag group of a crocodile detective carrying an excitable baby and watching a ninja chameleon, but if only they knew what they’d be in five or six years time <3

Next chapter out Tuesday, so see ya then! :D

Chapter 18: Witnesses and Interrogations

Chapter Summary

> ”Are you Larry the Walrus? A pleasure to meet you!” Vector grinned and held out his hand to shake. “Vector the Crocodile here, and this is Charmy Bee and Espio the Chameleon.”
>
> ”Right…” Larry looked doubtfully at the baby sleeping on Vector’s chest and the small chameleon next to him. “You sure it was a good idea to bring kids to a crime scene?”

Chapter Notes

> Hey everyone, and welcome to a new chapter of The Art of Espionage! Let’s see how the first Chaotix investigation goes! :3
>
> ▶ Minor TW spoilers below ^^
>
> As always comments and kudos are greatly appreciated and I hope you enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

> ”Are you Larry the Walrus? A pleasure to meet you!” Vector grinned and held out his hand to shake. “Vector the Crocodile here, and this is Charmy Bee and Espio the Chameleon.”
>
> ”Right…” Larry looked doubtfully at the baby sleeping on Vector’s chest and the small chameleon next to him. “You sure it was a good idea to bring kids to a crime scene?”

> ”I am not a kid.” Espio protested, but Vector quickly stepped in front of him.
>
> ”It’s a tactical move, you see.” He explained, brain whirling to come up with an excuse on the spot. He lowered his voice. “No one would suspect *us* of being private eyes. I mean, a ragtag group of a crocodile, a young chameleon and a baby bee? We’ll fly right under the radar of anyone suspicious!”
>
> ”I… suppose that’s true.” Larry frowned. “But um… if you don’t mind me asking, where did ya even find these guys? I highly doubt that you three are related and I don’t see any guardians anywhere…”
>
> ”I have no guardian and we discovered Charmy abandoned in an alleyway.” Espio told him unhelpfully, and Vector grimaced.

”Oh would you look at all those people around!” Vector hinted, giving Espio a look. “I don’t know how long I’ll be talking to Larry, so why don’t you interrogate some of the other witnesses around? Figure out where they were at the time and such?”

”Very well.” Espio nodded and turned away. “I will return with whatever information I acquire.”

”Thanks Es!” Vector called after him before letting out a sigh of relief. He turned back to Larry. “Hehe, sorry about that. Junior detectives, you know how they are.”

”I don’t actually.” Larry shook his head. “But whatever, the point is that I’m at least glad *someone* is able to take up this case. Jason is right over there.” He pointed over to a blue-green lizard mobian talking with some monkey mobian, long coat draping over him smoothly and confirming that his tail was gone. “I don’t really know what the protocol is here. Are you going to follow him? Talk with him?”

”I think it’s best that I speak with him first.” Vector told him. “Maybe he’ll tell me something useful.”

”He’s adamant that it’s all just ‘bad luck’ and that he doesn’t want to talk about it.” Larry sighed.

”Well maybe he’s crack under the interrogation of a trained detective such as…” Vector began, but he stiffened when a voice caught his attention, far to smooth to be casual conversation.

”Hey pal, what’re ya doing out here all alone?” Came that sickly sweet tone, and Vector stiffened when he heard Espio reply.

”Greetings, Sir. I am here investigating the concatenation of building collapses… do you possess any enlightenment about said events?” Espio asked, and Vector slowly turned around, eyes narrowed suspiciously. His young friend was talking with a tall wolf mobian, grinning down at him with a few too many teeth. Espio was completely oblivious to Vector’s worries as he spoke.

”Oho, such a vocabulary! You seem like such a neat kid, what’s your name, bud?” The wolf asked.

”Espio, Sir. And I am not a kid.” Espio replied, and the wolf’s grin grew wider.

”Oh of course, of course. You seem like a very mature investigator, and Espio is such a nice little name for a nice little fellow such as yourself. Are your parents around or… or are you really here all by yourself?” The wolf continued, yellow eyes scanning around the crowd and sweeping right over the crocodile, who tensed up. This was bad.

”My parents whereabouts are none of your concern. I am here on a case.” Espio replied, and Vector turned fully around at the way the wolf brightened and stepped closer to his friend.

”So you’re a brave little lad aren’t ya?” The wolf smiled. “You know, I might’ve heard a bit of the buildings… and I was here when this one went down too. Wanna come along so we can discuss it a bit more privately? Without so many potential eavesdroppers? I wouldn’t want them to hinder your investigation you know… it sounds awfully important…”

”Alright, that’s it.” Vector stormed over, tail lashing as he stood right behind Espio. The wolf shrank back slightly at his size, but that stupid grin stayed on his face. “What seems to be the issue here?”

”Vector.” Espio greeted. “This Mobian claims to have some information…”

”Well if that’s the case then ya wouldn’t mind tellin’ both of us, right?” Vector asked stiffly, and the wolf hesitated.

”And who might you be?” The wolf asked, eyes flicking back to Espio again and making Vector’s blood boil. “I thought you said you were alone, pal. Who’s this?”

”I’m Vector the Crocodile, thank you very much.” Vector told him sharply. “And you can address me to my face instead of goin’ through Es.”

“Vector, is there a problem?” Espio tilted his head. “This man claims to have information. The least we can do is hear him out.”

”Exactly! Just a friendly neighbor.” The wolf regained his composure and glanced back at Espio. “You really gonna let this guy boss you around? You look like a smart young man, capable of making your own decisions. Who even is this guy?”

Before Espio could even answer Vector blurted out, “I’m his dad.”

The wolf raised an eyebrow. “His… dad?”

Espio glanced up sharply, and Vector cleared his throat. “Erm… it’s an adoptive relationship. Same with Charmy Bee here. But point is that I’m not going to let my son wander off with some random person. Anything you need to say you can say to both of us.”

Espio was studying Vector carefully, clearly understanding that this was an intentional lie but unable to decipher why. At least he was staying quiet though, and the wolf looked disappointed. His tongue ran over his teeth, tail flicking uneasily as he glanced down at Charmy and then back over to Espio. “I see. Is that true, buddy?”

”Don’t call him that. He’s not your buddy. And it is true, so I’d appreciate it if ya stopped talking to my son here.” Vector said firmly. “Now what was it you wanted to say?”

”I’m not comfortable getting ganged up on.” The wolf glared at Vector and turned away. “Looks like ya lost yer tip.”

”My apologies, I’d be willing to step aside with you for a moment.” Espio started.

”No, you’re not.” Vector snipped.

Espio gave him a look before trying to switch tactics. “Then I could depart and you could converse with Vector.”

”Not interested.” The wolf threw over his shoulder before disappearing. Espio turned to the crocodile with a peeved expression.

”Why did you have to lie? Now we won’t be able to acquire—“ He began, but Vector rolled his eyes.

”That creep didn’t have any tip.” Vector almost spat before kneeling down and glaring intently into Espio’s eyes. But there was no malice in his expression—only a deep concern. “Can you really not see that? Why’d ya think he just wanted to talk to you and not me? Didn’t anyone teach you not to talk to strangers?”

Espio stiffened, and Vector realized that he must’ve hit a sore spot. “Everyone that you are unfamiliar with can be considered as a stranger. You were a stranger, after all.”

“Yeah, and you got lucky that I’m not a wackjob!” Vector scoffed.

”Well then if he didn’t have a tip, then what did he want?” Espio asked, and Vector hesitated. For someone so serious, the chameleon seemed to have genuinely know idea what creepy adults could want with a young kid on his own. It broke Vector’s heart—what would’ve happened if Espio hadn’t stumbled upon his agency when he did? He was so ignorant as if he’d just spawned into Mobius yesterday!

”… Just be careful, okay Es? Mobians like that are typically up to no good and… and just stay away from anyone you don’t know or are uncomfortable around who try to get you alone with them. Never go alone with strangers, understand that?” Vector finally said, grimacing as he realized that he was starting to sound like his own parents. Great Gaia, he wasn’t that old, was he? Soon he’d be saying stuff like ‘when I was your age’ and ‘get off my lawn’! Espio tilted his head.

”Why would I be uncomfortable with someone I could easily best in a fight?” The chameleon asked.

”Just be careful.” Vector sighed, stomach still rolling at what could’ve happened if Espio had went with that stupid wolf.

”Is everything okay over here?” Came a round, polite voice, and Vector looked up to see Jason the Lizard standing before him with a look of concern. He offered a smile. “I’ve just been trying to ensure that everyone uninjured after the incident. My name is Jason, who might you be?”

”Oh, hello Sir!” Vector stood up, making sure to keep Espio in front of him. No chance in chaos was he going to let the chameleon go off on his own again. “My name is Vector the Crocodile, and me and Espio the Chameleon here were just coming over to talk to you, actually!”

”Oh, of course!” Jason chuckled weakly. “If you’re trying to cash in on that sale we had, unfortunately the store is closed due to… *unforeseen* circumstances, ha ha.”

”Ha ha.” Vector laughed awkwardly along, not quite sure what was so funny. “Well yes, ahem, I was actually wanting to talk to you about the building collapses? It seems that you were at the sight of all of them, and I was just wondering if you saw anything.”

Jason immediately stiffened, and Vector’s eyes narrowed. The lizard chuckled. “Ah yes, I should’ve seen that question coming. Everyone has been asking me about it, but as I’ve told everyone else I am certain that it is no more than crummy coincidence. As for my own safety, I’m certain that fate won’t allow this to happen again.”

”I can understand your reluctance to dig deeper into it, Sir.” Vector tried. “You seem like a busy mobian. But at this point it has just happened far too often to be ‘fate’ or ’coincidence’ or whatever. So do you know anything about it? Something that you’re not letting on?”

”I’m afraid I can’t help you there.” Jason told him.

”Come on, you can trust me.” Vector offered a smile. “I honestly just want to help this not happen again.”

”So we interrogate the ones who claim to have no information and let the ones who do go?” Espio asked, still irked, and Vector grimaced.

”Do you have a family, Mr. Lizard?” Vector offered, and Jason hesitated.

”…Yes. I have a wife and a daughter.” He said, and Vector nodded.

”Well I’m sure that they’d both agree that they want you to be safe.” Vector told him kindly. “With a private eye such as myself I can assure you that we can fly under the radar as much as possible.”

Jason hesitated, glancing over at Espio and Charmy. He chuckled weakly. “I’m sure that you can relate to not wanting a huge investigation to open up as a father yourself, Mr. Crocodile. I… I’d hate to drag my family into all of this.”

”We are not related.” Espio muttered.

”Of course, that’s entirely understandable.” Vector agreed, ignoring Espio’s comment. “There’s lots of nosy news reporters here in Seaside City, and it’d be a shame for all the speculation to go to your family. Is there somewhere private we could talk that would make you more comfortable?” Upon seeing Jason hesitated once more, Vector added. “Look, the police are already getting antsy. Everyone can see that this is more than a coincidence, and it’s only a matter of time before they trace the steps back to you. We got a tip about this which is why we’re here, but with our help we could help ya settle this quickly and perhaps even give your information to the cops anonymously as long as you aren’t in direct danger. What do you say?”

Jason opened his mouth to speak, but a ping from his phone made him look down and check the message. Vector's eyes narrowed as the lizard's breathing caught even if his face betrayed nothing, finally looking up and at each of the detectives in turn. Finally he nodded. "There… there is a pizza parlor nearby. It's nice and quiet, a bit more elite, and I'd be happy to treat you three to a meal. Or treat you *two*, but you can bring your baby along if you want. Unless you have a babysitter or someone to watch him."

"We can just bring him, and thank you for your cooperation." Vector nodded. "Lead the way."

Chapter End Notes

Yikes, Vector was NOT having it with that wolf! Perhaps there was an advantage to Espio keeping a low profile all those months… but now that he's working in public he'd better watch out…

Next chapter out Thursday so see ya then! ^^

Chapter 19: No Longer ‘I’

Chapter Summary

> ”Are you certain it was a good idea to bring children to such a proper dining establishment?” Jason asked, sitting down and requesting a booster seat for Charmy. “Most parents might be afraid of the disruption.”
>
> ”Children would imply a plural amount of underage mobians, and I am not a child.” Espio muttered, and Vector resisted the urge to roll his eyes. What was Espio’s deal with being called a kid? Sure he’d been on his own for who knows how long, but why couldn’t he accept that his age wasn’t universally acknowledged in Mobius as mature?

Chapter Notes

> Hey everyone, and welcome to a new chapter! I hope you all enjoy, and also tysm for 100 kudos!! Your support means so much to me, and I hope that you continue to like the story! ^^
>
> As always comments and kudos are greatly appreciated<333

See the end of the chapter for more notes

”Are you certain it was a good idea to bring children to such a proper dining establishment?” Jason asked, sitting down and requesting a booster seat for Charmy. “Most parents might be afraid of the disruption.”

”Children would imply a plural amount of underage mobians, and I am not a child.” Espio muttered, and Vector resisted the urge to roll his eyes. What was Espio’s deal with being called a kid? Sure he’d been on his own for who knows how long, but why couldn’t he accept that his age wasn’t universally acknowledged in Mobius as mature?

”They uh, they aren’t my kids, per se. Their guardians are… out of the picture at the moment.” Vector chuckled slightly to remove the suspicion from his words. Jason tilted his head.

”Oh, well at least they have you to watch them. I hate to imagine any mobians this young wandering out in Seaside City by themselves… they belong in a healthy family, going to school and being cared for.” Jason’s eyes grew slightly distant. “If anything happened to my daughter I… I don’t know what I’d do.”

Vector felt a pang of compassion for the lizard, knowing that it couldn't be easy for him to acknowledge that he was likely being targeted and putting his family in danger. "Well, I can assure you that we will do everything in our power to ensure that you and your family are safe."

Jason blinked a few times, coming back to reality. "Oh, well they actually um… don't know about any of this."

"What? But it's all over the news!" Vector exclaimed. "They'd probably be worried about you!"

"Well they're actually on holiday right now, but they should be returning at the end of the week." Jason explained. "I want them to enjoy this time while they visit my in-laws, and besides my bad luck has to run out eventually."

"Right. Bad luck." Vector gave Jason a searching look. "You know you can trust us, right? We're only here to help, and this investigation will go a lot smoother if you're honest."

"Well…" Jason began, but at that moment a waiter bumped into their table, causing the lizard to flinch and try to cover it up. Vector looked up sharply to see a monkey mobian in a suit and tie, holding a note pad and watching them expectantly.

"My apologies for the interruption, however I am ready to take your order whenever you are ready." He commented, tapping a pen against the paper. Vector cleared his throat. "Um… I'll have a glass of cola please."

"Just water please. Iced, and with a lemon." Jason looked down at his plate.

"Es, do ya want anything?" Vector asked, and grimaced when Charmy started to whimper and whine. "Oh geez, what is it now?"

"Sir, I'm sure that you are aware that this is an… *elite* establishment, correct?" The monkey asked with a raised eyebrow, and Vector flushed.

"Yes um… yeah sorry I…" Vector frowned as he caught sight of Espio, whose tail was flicking as he watched Charmy with worried eyes. His breathing was slightly irregular, and Vector nudged him slightly. The chameleon flinched away from the touch hard, and Vector could've kicked himself. "Sorry Es… you alright?"

"Yes. My apologies." Espio looked down, and before Vector could pry Charmy let out a shrill squeal. Vector cringed and looked down at the baby now wriggling against his bonds, trying to get out of the carrier.

"I will have to ask you to leave if you cannot control your child." The monkey told him firmly, and Espio looked like he was shrinking in his seat. Vector sighed.

"He's not mine, and I'm working on it… come on Charmy, what is it?" Vector looked down in frustration at the kid, who pouted out his lower lip.

”Perhaps it is, in fact, better if you leave.” Jason let out a weak chuckle. “This entire meeting was a mistake on my part. We can all just…”

”No no, this is important!” Vector pleaded, tail thrashing behind him in irritation. Nothing was going his way! He had a fussy baby to worry about and a chameleon who looked like he needed heaps of therapy and a long nap and now his client was calling off the case? And he couldn’t even ask Espio to take Charmy outside in case there were any other wackadoos out there that the kid couldn’t identify! “Do ya want to take this back to our office or something? It’s not the prettiest place in the world, but at least—“

”*Everyone get out!*” A mobian in a suit and tie—presumably the manager—burst through the back door in a panic, waving his arms frantically and shouting. “There’s a gas leak! The building is coming down! Everyone out!”

There was a flurry of urgent instructions and worried screams as the customers all swarmed towards the exit, Jason going pale when Vector’s head snapped in his direction. “We need to get out! What are you just sitting there for?”

The lizard shook himself and stood up. “I *told* you that—“

”Oh dang nabbit I think you and I both know that luck has nothing to do with this!” Vector automatically reached out for Espio, not even caring about how he cringed at the contact at the moment as he scooped the kid into his arms and rushed for the door. “Come on! We need to get outta here!”

”I can walk—“ Espio began, but Vector wasn’t listening. He was too busy focusing on getting his boys out of danger, not stopping until he saw sunlight and even then running a safe distance away from the building as he heard the thunderous crash of an explosion inside. He wrapped his arms around Espio and Charmy as he felt the heat sting his back, trying to shield the both of them as much as possible. Heart pounding he finally let go, Charmy giggling and squealing in excitement. The bee clapped his little hands together and Vector rolled his eyes.

”Oh so *now* you stop crying…” He muttered before turning to Espio, who was staring blankly at the burning building. “Es? You alright? Nothin’ hurt?”

”I… am uninjured.” Espio turned away, and Vector sighed.

”As long as you’re fine, I guess.” The crocodile turned to look at Jason, who shrank away from his gaze. “Hey, Mr. Jason? Sorry I snapped at ya… are you okay?”

”Yes, but I’m a danger to everyone around me.” The lizard stepped back. “You should all keep your distance. I’ll be fine!”

”The Chaotix never gives up on a case! There’s nothin’ I can’t handle.” Vector hesitated, glancing back at the fire behind him and then at the two young children in his care with the realization that he was no longer just putting his own life at risk. “Well um… actually…”

”You have to think of the kids, Mr. Crocodile.” Jason urged. “I certainly think of mine first.”

”We are not related, as I have mentioned.” Espio turned to the lizard, chin held high. “Now since we have long since concluded that these instances are more than mere coincidences…”

”Es he could’ve died! Give him a sec!” Vector chided. “*You* could’ve almost died!”

”I am aware.” Espio frowned, and Vector almost face palmed. What was happening to him? He had been *waiting* for a case like this! Adventure! High risk! Mystery! Danger! This was right up his alley, so why was he now so caught up on these two kids he just happened to be watching at the moment?

It was all just terrible timing.

”Vector has a spare room in the agency.” Espio offered, and Vector’s head snapped towards him.

”That’s your—“

”I am merely staying in it temporarily. A client is more important.” The chameleon reminded, and if Vector had hair then he was certain he would’ve pulled it out in frustration. “I can find lodgings elsewhere.”

”No!” Vector exclaimed, and cleared his throat when Espio’s eyes narrowed. “I mean, uh, if you’re gonna work here *for the time being* then it would be beneficial to have ya close by. As detectives we never know when we’ll need to be called into action!”

”Does anyone ever really know when their life will change?” Espio challenged. “Is anyone ever truly prepared for the trials and storms of life? All we can do is live in the present—tied down to nothing and prepared to follow wherever the wind leads.”

”How old did you say he was again…?” Jason murmured, and Vector shook himself.

”Erm… Es, there’s no need for you to find somewhere else to stay. You work at the office, and can stay in a room with me and Charmy. Mr. Lizard, the Chaotix would be honored to offer you shelter and protection.” Vector turned to the lizard, eyes narrowing. “On one condition—we get a police perimeter.”

“What?” Jason took a step back. “But—“

”I understand you don’t want your family involved, so here’s what I’m thinking: you come stay with us in a protected home until your wife and daughter are due to arrive back home. At that point either a) we’ll have caught whoever it is after you or b) you’ll have convinced us that it’s no more than crappy luck. What do ya say?” Vector stuck out his hand. “Do we have a deal?”

Jason hesitated. “…What’s the address of the agency?”

”Here.” Vector pulled it up on his phone and showed the lizard. “See? Not the nicest place in the world but it’ll do the trick.”

Jason sucked in a deep breath, waiting only a moment more before nodding. “I’d… be very grateful to stay there. And you can promise me that the police will be gone in a week?”

”You have my word!” Vector smiled.

Jason let out a sigh and shook his hand. “Then it’s a deal.”

”Alright Es, you can take the bed and I’ll take the floor.” Vector yawned and gently set Charmy down in his cradle, grumbling slightly when the baby stubbornly tried to fly out. “No —Charmy just go to bed.”

”That is unnecessary.” Espio shook his head and stepped back, having finished taking most of his weapons out of Jason’s room and setting them to the side (though Vector suspected there was likely more hidden that he didn’t know about). “This is your own room and your own bed. It belongs to you.”

”Yeah well you’re the guest.” Vector told him.

”Correct. I am the guest, meaning I am an intrusion into your home.” Espio argued.

”But… you…” Vector pinched the bridge of his snout. This kid was impossible! How on earth could a *ten year old* end up like this? He was so formal and solemn… he was like an ancient soul trapped in a tiny body. How could Vector help him if he refused to accept any favors? Who in chaos made him feel like he needed to earn his worth or anything good in life? “Gaia… well I’m sleepin’ on the ground. The bed is open if ya want, or you can join me on the floor.”

Espio opened his mouth to reply, but at that moment Charmy started to whine and cry again. Vector groaned and trudged back over to the crib, eyes scanning over the little child in distress. “What is it, pal? I’m not a parent and I don’t have a handbook, could ya at least give me somethin’ to work with here?”

Of course Charmy only continued to cry, and Vector sighed, not really angry as he knew that the little bee couldn’t properly communicate. However Espio seemed unaware that his words were a meaningless vent, shying away again and averting his eyes. Vector scooped Charmy up into his arms and began to rock him gently, desperately hoping to soothe the sobs. What he didn’t expect was for Espio to pipe up quietly, “You can punish me instead, if you’d like to.”

”What?” Vector whipped around, and Espio flinched slightly.

”I know that this is all frustrating and a hinderance to your rest, but you can punish me instead however you like. I gave him to you despite knowing that you have never raised a child and do not know the mannerisms or specifications of young bee care, so in a sense his behavior is my responsibility. Just… please don’t hurt Charmy for this.” The chameleon mumbled, and Vector’s face immediately softened. What on earth…

”Es? Hey, look at me.” Vector kneeled down in front of the kid, waiting until those golden eyes met his own to see his sincerity. “Now listen very carefully when I tell you that I would *never* hurt you or Charmy—especially not because you’re having a bad night or whatever. I’m not mad and know that little kids just need some extra care sometimes. Do you understand that?”

Espio hesitated, still tense and watching Vector’s movements closely. Vector sighed. “I’m not going to punish Charmy or you for this, and I don’t know where ya came from but that’s not how you’re gonna be treated now, okay? No matter what happens I’m gonna make sure that the both of you are taken care of.”

Espio was silent for a few more moments before finally nodding stiffly and laying down to make himself comfortable on the floor. “…Very well. I will rest down here and where you choose to sleep is up to you.”

Vector remained still for a long while, watching the young chameleon curl up in a state of bafflement. Great Gaia… every new hint about Espio’s past made him sick. What kind of twisted life did he have before? After a moment the crocodile slipped out of the room, returning quickly with Espio’s heat lamp which he set up next to the chameleon. He turned it on and watched as Espio instinctively inched closer, tail twitching in pleasure. Vector smiled, nodding in contentment before laying down next to the chameleon—keeping a respectful distance—with Charmy by his side. Charmy yawned, and Vector chuckled. “Just for tonight you can sleep out here with us if it makes ya feel better, okay? Does that sound like a deal?”

Charmy babbled sleepily, nuzzling into Vector’s warmth as the crocodile slowly drifted off into a deep sleep.

Chapter End Notes

Yikes, poor Es but at least he’s in a better environment now!

Next chapter out Saturday, so see ya then! :)

Chapter 20: ‘Time Does Not Bring Relief; You All Have Lied’

Chapter Summary

> “So this is a… library?” Espio asked, glancing around at the tall stacks of books curiously. Vector nodded, Charmy fast asleep in his carrier.
>
> ”Yep! It’s got everything that anyone could ever need for information!” Vector grinned. “This is how the old classics do it—all good gumshoes rifle through old newspapers and all sorts of old stuff here.”

Chapter Notes

> Hey everyone, and welcome to a new chapter! Time for our boys to visit a library… better than it sounds I promise… hehe… ;)
>
> As always comments and kudos are greatly appreciated and I hope you enjoy! <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“So this is a… library?” Espio asked, glancing around at the tall stacks of books curiously. Vector nodded, Charmy fast asleep in his carrier.

”Yep! It’s got everything that anyone could ever need for information!” Vector grinned. “This is how the old classics do it—all good gumshoes rifle through old newspapers and all sorts of old stuff here.”

Espio felt a strange sort of calm in the old building, watching a light sprinkling of dust gently dance through the sunbeams and letting the silence soothe his anxiety. He clenched his jaw as he remembered how he used to romanticize imagery into words with Yuki but quickly shook off the feeling. Vector seemed to pick up on his new attitude, glancing over with his face softening. “You like it in here?”

”The atmosphere is pleasant.” Espio offered, golden eyes wandering over the rows and rows of books. They hadn’t read much in the Clan except for brief lessons in various languages, but an entire building filled with words? Information and history? “Why do so many people spend time dwelling in the past? Are detectives common here in Seaside City?”

Vector chuckled. “Well, crime never rests—especially in a city with the climate, scenery and tourists that we have here. But there’s not *just* newspapers in here. There’s also other books that people enjoy reading for entertainment.”

”Reading words? For entertainment?” Espio’s face scrunched up. “It sounds like a fatuous use of one’s time.”

”Well… well… I don’t know! There are some pretty good stories out there, and it can be nice to escape from reality for a bit. I know I was a fan of Sherlock Holmes growing up, and some of Edgar Allen Poe’s poetry had a nice edge to it even though it was just for school and I didn’t pay too much attention to it.”

”Poetry?” Espio tilted his head.

”Did you not learn about that in school?” Vector frowned. “Did your parents even take you to school?”

”If you are referring to the dull buildings where I noted children attending to educate themselves, then no I did not. I had a more formal learning in my…” Espio trailed off, tail flicking. He owed Vector no explanation to his education and it was best that he remained vague regarding his past. “I am unfamiliar with that English word, but perhaps I heard about it in my native tongue. Could you please define it?”

Vector hesitated, muttering something to himself about first languages before nodding. “Sure thing, uh… poetry. It’s… it’s kinda a—eh—*broad* term. It could mean rhyming words or sometimes it’s just a proper rhythm. But I think it also—ah, here we go!“ Vector snatched up a thick book laying on the table, chuckling to himself as he flipped through it. “Heh, gotta appreciate a good dictionary. Ahem, *‘poetry: writing that formulates a concentrated imaginative awareness of experience in language chosen and arranged to create specific emotional response through meaning, sound and rhythm.’* Yeah okay I didn’t get half of that but I’m sure you did, and in the meantime I should look up the rest of these words.”

”Fascinating.” Espio mused, before frowning at the dictionary. “Is that then a book filled with words as well? Words defining other words?”

”Huh? Oh, yeah. Wanna see it?” Vector handed the chameleon the book, and Espio could feel the crocodile’s eyes on him as he flipped through it and hummed in concentration.

’Grandiloquent: marked by a lofty, extravagantly colorful, pompous or bombastic style, manner, or quality especially in language.’

He flipped to another page.

‘Kaleidoscopic: constantly changing; rapidly shifting.’

‘Prevaricate: to speak falsely or misleadingly; deliberately misstate or create an incorrect impression; lie.’

’Ninjutsu: the Japanese martial art that is a collection of techniques originally practiced for Japanese espionage purposes, and includes methods of gathering information, nondetection, avoidance, and misdirection techniques. Used by a ninja.’ Alternatively, ‘*The traditional Japanese method of espionage; involves stealthy movements and the use of camouflage.*’

He hesitated slightly before turning back a bit.

'Espionage: the practice of spying or using spies to obtain information about the plans and activities especially of a foreign government or a competing company.' "It appears that Oskar was correct about the word 'espionage'." He mused aloud.

Vector looked up. "Wait… wait is that what Espio is short for? Espionage?"

"That would be correct." Espio nodded, and Vector frowned.

"Then is Espio not even your real name?"

"Also correct, if by 'real name' you are referring to the string of symbols and syllables assigned to me at birth, but it is the name you will address me as." The chameleon turned away, not wishing to get into further discussion with the crocodile regarding his name or his past. All the words were strangely… beautiful to him, and there was something almost peaceful or sacred about learning all that a single element of speech could hold.

Perhaps he would so seek out the poetry section after all.

'Ninjutsu: the Japanese martial art that is a collection of techniques originally practiced for Japanese espionage purposes, and includes methods of gathering information, nondetection, avoidance, and misdirection techniques. Used by a ninja.'

Vector scratched his head, looking up from the definition on his phone and watching as Espio's purple tail disappeared into the poetry section of the library. At least the kid was enjoying himself he supposed, and besides he likely wouldn't know what to look for in this investigation. But after the immense focus he showed how was a *library* of all places the thing to distract him? Vector stored that information away for later as he turned towards the newspaper section, keeping a keen ear out for any signs of a struggle in case Espio was confronted again.

He nodded to himself as he scanned the most recent papers, carefully taking in the headlines 'ANOTHER BUILDING LOST' and 'WHILE ANOTHER STRUCTURE CRUMBLES, SUSPICION BUILDS'. His golden eyes darted to the proper section, beginning to read.

'In accordance with the strange string of building collapses we've see lately, the Livaldi's Pizzeria has officially joined it's kin in the rubble. This was due to a gas leak back in the kitchen, the manager insists, and although they had supposedly undergone inspections in the past week apparently the inspectors missed this crucial threat. But the question remains: how many more historic structures or potentially lives *will we lose before authorities figure out the meaning behind it all?'*

Vector frowned, eyeing the words 'historic structures'. Could that be a coincidence? He quickly pulled up some of the addresses, realizing that all the buildings were completed within the same few years, about thirty years ago when the city was being built. His heart leaped as he quickly searched for newspapers around that time, hoping to find anything out of the ordinary.

”Vector, I—“ Espio came around the corner, face buried inside a book of poems before he looked up and noticed all the newspapers around the crocodile. “My apologies… what did you find?”

”Hey Es, I was just trying to see if there’s anything else to connect these buildings.” Vector grinned. “I knew there had to be something! They can’t all just be random, and this is no bad luck!” He hesitated slightly at the sight of the poetry book in the kid’s hands, standing up and gently reaching out. “Actually, why don’t you go over those and see if you can figure anything out? I already know that—“

”Interesting. All the buildings appear to have been finalized during a similar period of time.” Espio mused, glancing down at the dates of the newspapers Vector had left out. The crocodile blinked before nodding.

”Um… yeah. Good eye, Es.” He traded the poetry book for the newspaper on the proper year, knowing that he had two mysteries he needed to solve and hoping that he could perhaps get a better hint on the covert one. “You keep checking it out and I’m going to go make sure that all the books were put back properly.”

”I have already deduced by the numbers on the spines and the alphabetical order of the—“

”I’m just going to make sure!” Vector hurried off, leaving the chameleon to catch himself up as he glanced down at the poem Espio had been reading when coming over first.

”Time does not bring relief; you all have lied” by Edna St. Vincent Millay

Time does not bring relief; you all have lied

Who told me time would ease me of my pain!

I miss him in the weeping of the rain;

I want him at the shrinking of the tide;

The old snows melt from every mountain-side,

And last year’s leaves are smoke in every lane;

But last year’s bitter loving must remain

Heaped on my heart, and my old thoughts abide.

There are a hundred places where I fear

To go,—so with his memory they brim.

And entering with relief some quiet place

Where never fell his foot or shone his face

I say, "There is no memory of him here!"

And so stand stricken, so remembering him.

Vector frowned. Okay, so not the poem he was expecting. He glanced at the next page.

"Long Distance II" by Tony Harrison

Though my mother was already two years dead
Dad kept her slippers warming by the gas,
Put hot water bottles her side of the bed
And still went to renew her transport pass.

You couldn't just drop in. You had to phone.
He'd put you off an hour to give him time
To clear away her things and look alone
As though his still raw love were such a crime.

He couldn't risk my blight of disbelief
Though sure that very soon he'd hear her key
Scrape in the rusted lock and end his grief.
He knew she'd just popped out to get the tea.

I believe life ends with death, and that is all.
You haven't both gone shopping; just the same,
In my new black leather phone book there's your name
And the disconnected number I still call.

Vector quickly slammed be book shut, staring at the cover which read 'A Complete Collection of Poems About Grief'. Recalling the dictionary Espio had been reading he quickly pulled up the definition on his phone, reading, *'Grief: deep mental anguish, as that arising from bereavement, or an instance of this.'* He quickly followed up with, *'Bereavement: state of sorrow over the death or departure of a loved one.'*

Vector felt his chest seize up. Maybe this was just random coincidence, but still it was unusual for a ten-year-old to be drawn to a poem book regarding grief. What about those random, lighthearted poems that he'd read growing up? Perhaps Espio was just fascinated with the darker side of emotions, but it still made Vector uneasy. He was already fairly certain that whatever the kid had gone through was traumatic and involved abuse of some kind but wasn't sure how aware Espio was of his own past. Did he just view it as a different normal? Did he know it was wrong?

Did he still prefer it?

"Vector?" Came Espio's call, and Vector scrambled to shove the poem book back onto the shelf before the chameleon could see him despite his excuse of organizing the titles. He casually walked around the shelves, yelping at the kid's sudden presence. "Geez Es! I didn't even hear ya walk up!"

”A ninja always masks their presence. We remain silent and at one with our surroundings.” Espio commented before holding up a newspaper from around the same time the buildings had been completed. “Could this have a correlation to our present case?”

Vector frowned, taking the newspaper and scanning over the contents. It was a section regarding an inheritance given to a familiar name…

”Monroe the Lizard?” Vector exclaimed. “Do you think that…”

”Exactly. I assume that he must be related to our client.” Espio nodded. “And it appears that Mr. Monroe the Lizard was killed in a vehicle accident soon afterwards.”

Vector’s mind was whirling. “This is great! I mean, not for Mr. Lizard, but still good job Es. Do you know what this means?”

Espio blinked at him in confusion. “Good… job? All I did was acquire a paper and read the words printed on it.”

His words took Vector aback for a moment, faced with the painful realization that Espio probably wasn’t used to being complimented. He shook his head to clear it before nodding. “Yeah, well you still put the pieces together and that’s what good detectives do, so good job. And this means that we have our first lead!”

”Does the knowledge that our client had a wealthy grandfather really qualify as a lead?” Espio asked, and Vector nodded enthusiastically.

”Heck yeah it does! It connects him with these supposed ‘random’ building collapses! And do you know why that is?”

”…Because he has a family member who received an inheritance around the time all the buildings were completed?”

”Because he has a family member who received an inheritance around the time all the buildings were completed!” Vector repeated triumphantly. “So his uncle gets rich quick and then gets murdered? *And* now all the buildings that were completed around that time are collapsing? Bad luck my—“ Vector hesitated, glancing at Charmy who was blinking sleepily in his carrier. “My… foot. Yeah, foot. Point is that this isn’t a coincidence and Jason is likely tied to his grandpa who is tied to the buildings and—“

”Shhhhh!” An irritated monkey librarian glared at them from the shelf where she was restocking books, and Vector grimaced.

”Oh! Sorry, Ma’am.” Vector apologized before lowering his voice. “Now that’s score one for the Chaotix Detective Agency!”

”Celebrating before victory can be a tragic folly.” Espio hinted, but something inside of Vector flipped at his words and he straightened up.

”You know what? I think we all deserve this win.” The crocodile announced, and Espio frowned. “We finally figured something out in this case that has left the police chasing their

tails, and that's good enough for me. Why don't we all go out and try something fun?"

"Fun? If by that you mean a pointless excursion then you can continue on without me and I will meet you back at the agency."

"Come on Espio, just this once?" Vector pleaded, almost desperate to get this kid to do something other than work. "I can take you and Charmy out to the boardwalk, and if it makes you feel better then we can look out for any shady characters. But I think we all deserve to celebrate even the small wins to keep up our spirits. What do you say?"

Espio hesitated, eyeing Vector with calculating eyes. "…Your enthusiasm is unprecedented yet infectious. Very well—I will remain alert and studious at all times."

"Yeah yeah, whatever you say, bud." Vector grinned. "I'm still calling it fun."

Chapter End Notes

Hooray for the Chaotix figuring things out! I wonder how this all ties together…

Also random fun fact but one of my favorite ways to write mysteries is to have someone (in this case my twin sister lol) give me a bunch of random words and then find a way to piece them together! Also when she gave me the word 'lizard' I knew he had to work at a retail store… re-tail store… if you couldn't tell I was very tired when writing it XD but yeppers now I've got a full mystery and my sister questioning my sanity so it's a win-win! :3

(Also is Mobius tied to earth? Is it the name for earth that the sonic characters call it or a different planet altogether? Where all these locations are canon but then so is GUN and… idk but enjoy some poems from real writers and don't think too deeply about lore XD)

Next chapter out Tuesday, so see ya then! ^^

Chapter 21: Sandcastles

Chapter Summary

Charmy giggled and splashed in the shallow water, Vector and Espio keeping a close eye on him to make sure he didn't go deeper and that there weren't any big waves coming. A monkey lifeguard had already asked them if everything was okay, and the crocodile had done his best to assure him that everything was fine and under control despite Espio's eye daggers. He took in a deep breath and grinned. "Ah, Seaside City! Notorious for crime and bustling tourists but also for its gorgeous beaches and ocean view! What a place!"

Chapter Notes

Hey everyone, and welcome to a new chapter!! A little late since I had a long drive home from work lol, but now it's here! Time for a little beach escapade, so I hope you enjoy! ^^

As always comments and kudos are greatly appreciated <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Charmy giggled and splashed in the shallow water, Vector and Espio keeping a close eye on him to make sure he didn't go deeper and that there weren't any big waves coming. A monkey lifeguard had already asked them if everything was okay, and the crocodile had done his best to assure him that everything was fine and under control despite Espio's eye daggers. He took in a deep breath and grinned. "Ah, Seaside City! Notorious for crime and bustling tourists but also for its gorgeous beaches and ocean view! What a place!"

"The sunlight… is pleasant." Espio admitted, glancing out over the ocean. "It brings energy and warmth to cold-blooded mobians such as you and I, even if it is quite exposed."

"That's the spirit!" Vector knelt down, helping Charmy form a small mound of sand. "We building a castle, pal? I can help."

"A castle of sand?" Espio's face scrunched up. "The material is inherently unstable and a foolish beginning to such a feat. When creating a new structure one of the most important factors to consider is the foundation and location or else your work will be in vain once it all comes crumbling down." A wave bubbled over and leveled the tiny mound, Espio nodding. "As I said."

”This is just for fun, Es.” Vector explained, helping Charmy dig a moat for water to flow through. “It’s not meant to last—it’s the experience that counts.”

”I believe that Charmy’s young, underdeveloped brain is incapable of storing this particular memory long-term.”

”You’d be surprised. You never really know what kids will remember, and besides he’ll at least remember the *feeling*.” Vector sat back slightly as Charmy pilled more sand on their little island, babbling happily. “Heck, there’s this raggedy old blanket at home that I’ve obviously outgrown but that my mom would wrap me in when I was a baby. Now I can’t remember specifically that blanket, but there’s somethin’ about it that still to this day makes me feel at ease. Same with an old mill pond up at my grandpa’s place—I grew up visiting there a lot and to me it’s one of my favorite places in the world even though it’s run down and probably a health hazard at this point.”

Espio frowned. “If you have outgrown the blanket and the mill pond is crumbling then why would you still keep either of them?”

Now it was Vector’s turn to frown. “Well… I don’t know! Because of the memories they have! Besides my grandpa has a firm belief that everything can be fixed with duct tape and has yet to be proven wrong.”

”Sentimentality is a danger to one’s inner peace and ability to move forward in life.” Espio’s eyes grew distant. “The closer you are to someone or something the harder it is when they are finally gone.”

”…Espio? Are you okay?” Vector asked gently, and Espio shook himself before turning away.

”Nothing ever lasts forever. Life is made up of cycles—we are born, we live, we die, and then someone else rises up to take our place. Locations and material objects serve their purpose and then break down. It is best to accept that and become one with the natural passage of time.” He muttered, and although Vector wanted to wrap the kid in a hug he knew that he needed to maintain boundaries. He sighed.

”Okay, *logically* I suppose that *technically* you would be *partially* correct.” Vector said slowly. “But then again there’s also no doubt about the way experiences stick with us. Like my old teacher, for instance. I can’t even remember her name but I still remember the way she told me that I could do anything I set my mind to as long as I was willing to put in the work. It really stuck with me, y’know? I mean, the agency might not be the nicest place in the world and I’ve gotta still scrimp and save just to keep it running, but to me it’s perfect. It’s proof that I’m living my dream no matter what the circumstances. And my parents and brothers too… I’d do anything for them even if we don’t always see eye-to-eye.” Vector hesitated before side-eyeing Espio. “Do you have anyone like that? Someone you still think of fondly despite time?”

Espio hesitated, tail flicking uneasily. “I do not dwell on the past.”

”What about Yu—“

”I said that I do not dwell on the past!” Espio snapped, golden eyes blazing as his tail thrashed. Vector blinked in surprise.

”…Sorry bud, I didn’t mean to pry or anything.” The crocodile finally told him.

”My apologies. I did not intend to lose my temper.” Espio closed his eyes and took a deep breath. “I just… do not see the value in holding oneself back mentally.”

”It doesn’t have to hold you back, you know.” Vector said tentatively, watching Espio’s reaction carefully. “The right memories can actually inspire you forward. Keep you going when times get tough.”

Espio tiled his head in consideration. “An interesting perspective. It is a given that our experiences make up who we are, but they are nothing more than lessons to shape us into someone wiser in the future.”

”Well, maybe ya just need to find something worth remembering.” Vector commented. “Some good experiences to think of fondly or mobians who leave a positive impact on your life.“

”…But they will still die. The experiences will fade.” Espio pointed out.

”But it’s still in your mind! Don’t you have *anything* that you still remember fondly?” Vector asked, almost at his wit’s end. Espio shrugged, and Vector sighed. “Well either you’re wanting to stay mysterious or we’ll just have to change that.” The chameleon suddenly stiffened, and Vector frowned. “Es? You alright?”

”Something’s approaching.” Espio said, scales flickering, but before Vector could ask he heard the whirring of a high-tech engine approaching.

”What…” He began, but was quickly interrupted by an eccentric, gravelly voice.

”*MUAHAHAHAHA! Make way for a new theme park I’m* shore *you’ll love!*” Crowed a voice from above as a shadow replaced the warmth Vector had grown accustomed to. He automatically reached for Charmy, scooping the kid up in his arms even as the bee babbled and waved his little fists at the sky. Vector raised his eyes to see a strange flying half-orb that carried none other than Dr. Eggman, who was cackling to some robot prototype next to him. “Hehehe do you see what I did there? *Shore*? Who am I kidding—I don’t care what you think. Obliterator Bot—OBLITERATE!”

Vector’s tail thrashed as a large robot stomped out of the surrounding trees, each step making the ground tremble. Okay so this wasn’t the best introduction to the beach for his boys, but it didn’t matter right now! They could have a redo some other time, but he wasn’t about to leave a ten-year-old and a baby to get squashed by one of those giant metal feet. He reached out for Espio but stiffened when he only found empty air, looking around desperately. “Espio?! Where’d ya go? Es?”

”Hehehehehe, once this place is leveled then it will be the perfect spot for my scare-coaster! It can go upside down and dip it’s rider’s heads in chopper-infested waters! That will be

hilarious!" Eggman continued, grinning from ear to ear. "Oh all those screams are music to my ears. I should record this moment for future reference—"

Shunk!

"Hey!" Eggman raised his hands defensively as something bounced off his metal orb. "Woah there, Protobot what was that?"

"It appeared to be—" the robot began began before something pierced through it's middle, causing it to fizzle and spark before it's eyes went dark. Eggman scowled.

"Oh confound it, there goes my first prototype for a sidekick bot! Along with the name 'protobot'. What's next, naming them after their head-shapes?" Eggman frowned as he pulled something from the bot's center. "What the… who's throwing knifes at me?! That's not the blue rodent's style!"

Oh crap.

"Espio! I'm not joking here—come out!" Vector hissed, eyes scanning his surroundings for the invisible ninja. Eggman yelped as a few more projectiles bounced off his metallic carrier, flying it higher and looking around angrily.

"Obliterator Bot, help your creator!" He commanded, mustache quivering. He turned to glare at the fleeing crowd. "If I figure out which of you is trying to play the hero then—"

"Yo Egghead! What's the haps?" Called out a cocky voice, and Eggman and Vector both whipped around to see none other than Sonic the Hedgehog tapping his foot and smirking up at the doctor. Eggman scowled.

"Sonic!" He spat, voice thick with distain. "How did you get here?! I was over in Windmill Village just an hour ago!"

"Oh you know, fastest thing alive, kinda my thing." Sonic yawned. "But you should really give up the idea of that stupid theme park of yours—"

"ACK!" Eggman ducked as another knife whizzed by. "You know that's really rude of you, rodent! Whatever happened to villain-hero banter? To becoming acquainted before the fight? Kids these days…"

"What?" Sonic cocked his head. "But I didn't…"

"YES YOU DID! Mr. 'Fastest Thing Alive'!" Eggman shouted back, and as they argued Vector took the opportunity to hurry over and feel around the edge of the forest where the knives were being thrown from in the vain hope to find Espio.

"Espio? Come on, I'm not playing around here!" He pleaded. "Good job—you stalled him. But now we've gotta book it! Sonic's here and he knows how to deal with Eggman… and great Gaia how on earth do you have so many knives on you…"

”You! Crocodile!” Eggman called out, and Vector froze, holding Charmy a bit closer to himself. “Yeah, you! Why aren’t you running like everyone else?”

In a flash of blue Sonic darted over to stand in front of Vector, holding his arms out defensively. “Woah there, Doc! He’s got a baby with him! Why not keep the fight over somewhere else, huh? Sound like a plan?”

”Exactly! Nothing to see here… just gonna leave… as soon as I uh… yeah…” Vector chuckled nervously. Where was Espio? He couldn’t just leave the kid here to fight for himself!

”As soon as what?” Eggman’s mustache twitched in suspicion, but at that moment Charmy giggled and shoved his way out of Vector’s arms, flying into the air. Vector gasped and dove forward, but the little bee only babbled and flew higher towards Eggman, who screamed and backed up in his flying orb.

”ACK! Get that thing away from me! It probably smells and is littered with germs!” He shouted.

“Aww then you’re practically family, eh Egghead?” Sonic called back.

”I liked you better when you didn’t talk.” Eggman muttered before Charmy darted towards him and he dodged. “Get away from me you little—AGAIN WITH THE KNIVES dang nabbit Sonic! Didn’t you ever hear about proper kitchen cutlery etiquette… MY SCREEN!“ He stiffened when a blade shattered he front dash of his orb, glancing over at the blue hedgehog. “Wait… if you’re over there… and the knife came from over *there*…”

“I’ve got the kid! Brave little one, isn’t he?” Sonic gave Vector a snappy salute and dashed over to the nearest building, spin dashing up the side and vaulting in the air towards an excited Charmy.

”Gotcha!” Sonic bounced off Eggman’s machine for momentum, snatched the kid out of the air, did a little flip and finally landed safely on the ground, grinning at how Charmy squealed and clapped his hands. “Did ya like that, little guy? I like adventure too.”

”Confound it, Sonic!” Eggman shouted angrily, trying to still his orb.

”Sonic!” Charmy chirped.

Sonic chuckled and waved off Eggman. “Just lay off it already. See ya at Spiral Hill.”

Eggman started. “What—how did—I’m not going to Spiral Hill! You’re off your rocker, rodent!”

”Well now you won’t, so fight ya later!” Sonic winked before starting towards Vector as Eggman flew off irritatedly, calling for his obliterator bot to follow. “Here’s your kid—“

”*Let him go.*” Came Espio’s tense voice from right in front of Vector, who jumped. A knife materialized from thin air, held towards Sonic threateningly. “Now.”

”Es! Where were ya?!” Vector exclaimed, and Sonic skidded to a stop.

”Who’s this?” He asked, and Vector flushed.

”Um… sorry about all this…” Vector lowered his voice slightly. “Hey Espio? Sonic’s just returning Charmy—he’s not trying to hurt him.”

The knife remained for a few more moments before it was finally dropped and Espio flickered into view, golden eyes filled with suspicion. Sonic grinned.

”Sweet disappearing trick you’ve got there!” Sonic whistled as he held out Charmy, Espio snatching him back and holding him close. Sonic raised his hands in surrender. “Woah there, I wasn’t trying to worry you but am glad you all are safe. Were you the one throwing the knives at him?”

”They were only warning shots.” Espio sniffed.

”You’ve got quite the crew there, Mr. Crocodile!” Sonic grinned. “Well, it was nice meeting you guys but I’ve gotta run. See ya!”

Vector jumped slightly as the blue blur dashed off, watching the hedgehog disappear over the horizon. Espio turned to him, holding out Charmy. “I was unsure of your stance with that man. Next time should I aim to kill or just warn—“

”Kill?! Wait wait wait, first off you can’t just go off by yourself like that!” Vector exclaimed, worriedly taking Charmy and kneeling to peer into Espio’s eyes. “You could’ve gotten yourself hurt! And for the love of chaos *where did you get so many knives*?!”

”This one is only my ninth.” Espio shrugged, picking the blade up from the ground where he’d dropped it to take Charmy. He slipped it into his boot and turned back to Vector. “Besides, I am more than capable of taking care of myself. It was my enemy who should’ve been afraid, as he was.”

Vector hesitated. “Yeah well… you don’t wanna kill someone. You might be *able* to, but honestly that stuff will scar you for life. Do you really want to live with someone’s life on your conscience?”

Espio stared at him a long moment, tail flicking before he turned away. “Request acknowledged. Now let’s go—it’s getting dark.”

”Why are we in here, Vector?” Espio asked, cautiously following the crocodile through the gift shop.

”Just looking to see if there’s anything we can get for Charmy.” Vector called without turning around. He was still caught up on the chameleon’s words and actions, being willing to hurt or perhaps even kill someone without any second thoughts. He wanted to ask about it but was unsure as to how since Espio was already touchy about anything regarding himself. But as of

right now he was hoping to perhaps grab a bucket for future beach escapades with Charmy—if he was still watching him then, of course—and maybe a couple bottles of cola as well.

”Hm.”

Vector glanced over to see Espio examining a ninja figurine, quietly fiddling with the arms and watching it closely. His face betrayed nothing, but the way he made the limbs adjust and slightly moved the toy as if it were walking tugged at Vector’s heartstrings.

”Why is this here?” Espio asked.

”I guess there was some sort of ninja movie that came out recently. These are some exclusive action figures from the film.” Vector watched Espio carefully.

”Well his shozuko is untraditional, and there are a couple other discrepancies in the ensemble.” Espio observed quietly.

”Right… did you wear one of those?” Vector asked.

”It was… a long time ago.” Espio commented, eyes still on the figurine. “My clan gave it to me, but it was lost.”

Vector blinked. Now there was a ‘clan’ too? But before he could press further, Espio asked, “I am only curious as to why a small figurine is being sold here.”

”Well, I guess some folks like collecting them or their kids like playing with them.” Vector told him. He hesitated slightly. “Do you… like it?”

”I am not a child. And I can understand that our financial situation does not allow for frivolous collectibles.” Espio placed the figurine back, almost reluctantly, and began walking away. Vector hesitated, never having seen the chameleon show partiality to something before.

“Are you ready to go home?” The chameleon asked, and Vector froze. Espio didn’t even seem to register what he had said—just waited patiently by the door. But did he really just say what Vector thought he said? Or had that been a figure of his mind?

”Yeah… yeah we can head out once I finish buying a couple things.” Vector replied, trying to act casual as he snatched a couple bottles of cola and a bright red plastic bucket from a display case. He hesitated, turning around and looking back at the action figure Espio had been interested in.

In a split second decision he decided that he would make it work and snatched the figurine off the shelf to buy.

Chapter End Notes

Whelp, Eggman jumpscare heh. But at least the gang met Sonic and Es got his action figure! ^^

Next chapter out Thursday so see ya then! :D

Chapter 22: Uncertain Definitions

Chapter Summary

Espio's tail flicked as he dug through the box of old books Vector had brought in for storage, excitement growing with each new volume he discovered. Who knew there were so many stories in the world, each one so unique and intriguing? The crocodile was talking with Jason at the moment so there was no one present to witness him except for Charmy, who of course would tell no one.

Chapter Notes

Hey everyone, and welcome to a new chapter!! I hope you all enjoy! :D

As always comments and kudos are greatly appreciated <333

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Espio's tail flicked as he dug through the box of old books Vector had brought in for storage, excitement growing with each new volume he discovered. Who knew there were so many stories in the world, each one so unique and intriguing? The crocodile was talking with Jason at the moment so there was no one present to witness him except for Charmy, who of course would tell no one.

True to Vector's word, there were plenty of Sherlock Holmes mysteries, the covers worn and spines dented slightly. They had a particular scent to them as well that Espio had detected at the library, musty yet comforting in a strange way. There was also a collection of The Hardy Boys mysteries, which the chameleon found intriguing, and a couple of books written in a sort of poetic and script-like format authored by someone named 'William Shakespeare'. The words in those volumes such as 'Macbeth' or 'Hamlet' were more elegant and purposeful, challenging his mind and causing him to pause at times and think about the passages.

Charmy babbled at him and flew over, almost toppling into the box before Espio snatched him up and set him down safely. "Careful, you need to work on your landing if you insist on flying everywhere."

"Cahful!" Charmy put on a serious face and waggled a finger at Espio, who huffed in amusement.

"You're fortunate you didn't do that to my father." Espio commented, picking up one of his books. "He would've never tolerated such disrespect and mockery."

”Father?” Charmy tilted his head, Espio hesitating.

”Yes… I’m not entirely sure what that defines anymore either.” The chameleon muttered before sighing at the hopeful look on the bee’s face. “What is it now, Charmy?”

”’Spio!” Charmy grinned, finger tapping Espio’s horn. “‘Spio!”

Espio blinked in surprise. “Yes… that is my name. Did you learn that from Vector?”

”Vec… tor…” Charmy tried, little face scrunched in concentration.

”Vector.” Espio helped, enunciating the name. “Vector.”

”Vector?” Charmy looked around, pointing towards the door. Espio sighed.

”My apologies Charmy, but Vector isn’t here at the moment. He will return shortly.” The chameleon stiffened at Charmy’s pout. “No don’t… don’t cry. Vector will be back soon.”

”Vector!” Charmy wailed, and Espio shushed him worriedly, getting onto his knees and trying to calm the child.

”Shhhh, it’s okay! Vector will be mad if you… or he won’t but… just please don’t cry. He will be here soon.” Espio pleaded, but Charmy dug a tiny fist into his eyes and reached both hands towards the chameleon with a whimper.

”’Spio?” He whined, and Espio frowned.

”Yes, that is me. I am unsure of what you want.” Espio grimaced, unsure of how to calm a fussy baby. In his experience, when he lost his composure as a child his father would hit him until he forced himself to stop crying, tears streaming from his eyes as he bit his tongue so hard he tasted blood. But he could never bring himself to hurt Charmy in the same way he knew, and so now he only tried to deepen his shallow breaths as he pleaded with the baby. “Charmy, I don’t understand.”

”’Spio! Up?” Charmy crawled closer, arms still reaching for the chameleon, and Espio clenched his jaw as he realized the kid wanted to be held.

”Charmy… no. Please just remain there.” Espio turned away, but Charmy let out a shrill wail and the chameleon flinched. “No no no don’t cry again… fine.”

He gingerly picked the bee up and set him in his lap, holding the book out in front of them. He tensed up slightly as Charmy snuggled back against him, heart thudding as phantom pains rushed through his body. He took a deep breath, waiting a moment before opening to the beginning of the story. This wasn’t so bad, he supposed, and as long as it kept Charmy quiet. “You win, little one. Just this once, and don’t you dare tell Vector.”

“Hey, Mr. Lizard.” Vector gently stepped out onto the porch, Jason jumping slightly before chuckling.

”Vector! My apologies, I would’ve expected you and the others to be asleep by now.” He told him. “It’s difficult to see the stars but a few are making it through.”

”Mind if I join you?” The crocodile asked, and Jason nodded so Vector sat down next to him, glancing out at the street where it was almost abandoned save for a monkey mobian out walking with their chao companion. “Thanks. I was… actually hoping to talk to you—“

”My daughter loved the stars.” Jason mused, not quite listening to Vector. “We live on the outskirts of Seaside City where there’s less light pollution so she adored sitting on this old swingset and staring at the sky for hours after dark. I’d stay up to make certain she was safe, but we were far enough away from the city that there was never a problem.”

”Sounds like you love your daughter, Mr. Lizard.” Vector said softly, and Jason nodded.

”Please, call me Jason. I’m already intruding in your home and there’s no need for such formality.” Jason told him before hesitating and looking back up at the sky. “But yes, yes she and my wife are everything to me. I’d do absolutely anything for the both of them.”

”I’m sure you would, as any good father would.” Vector agreed. “And I can promise you that by the time they come back from vacation I’ll have done everything in my power to make sure everything is back to normal.”

”Hm? Oh, yes. Thank you.” Jason glanced over at the crocodile. “I do appreciate your efforts, even though I’m certain that everything will solve itself.”

”Right. And about that…” Vector took a deep breath. “I was meaning to ask you… well… what do you know of your grandfather Monroe?”

Jason started, looking at Vector in surprise. “How do you know about him? I don’t recall…”

”I’m a detective, Mr. Lizard. It’s my job to be informed regarding all sides of a case.” Vector looked back out at the street, not wanting to pressure his client with direct eye contact. “I’m very sorry for your loss.”

”That… was a long time ago. But thank you, I appreciated your condolences.” Jason nodded. “Is there… a specific reason you bring him up?”

”As a matter of fact, there is.” Vector nodded. “It seems as though he received quite the inheritance all that time ago, didn’t he?”

Jason sighed. “Yes… but I wish he hadn’t.”

Vector perked up. “What? Why not? Wouldn’t his prosperity pass to your dad and then to yourself? Or were you not close…”

”I never knew him well, but the money was lost.” Jason told him. “He only had it for a few months before he died in that crash and it was never recovered.”

”You don’t say.” Vector’s mind was racing. The money was lost? *And* Monroe mysteriously died in a crash? The pieces were coming together to form an ugly picture, but still it didn’t

make a ton of sense. “If the money was lost, then how are you involved?”

”…Who said I was involved with the money?” Jason chuckled, almost stiffly it seemed to Vector. “As I told you I never get a cent. My wealth was acquired over my entrepreneurial pursuits.”

”Right, well, how come all the buildings that have been collapsing were built when your grandfather received his inheritance?” Vector pointed out, and Jason shifted his weight on the step.

”You’re quite astute, Vector. I suppose that as a detective I shouldn’t be surprised that you put that together.” Jason sighed, hands clenching in his lap. “I thought about that myself, but I don’t see how it’s entirely relevant. My grandfather was the owner of a successful building company hired to help expand the old Seaside City, and when he received the money it gave him the finances to complete most of his projects and then some.”

”Your grandfather was the one who built all the buildings that have been coming down?” Vector blinked. “Did he forget to follow code or something?”

Jason hesitated, eyes darting to and away from Vector’s searching face. “No… no he was a great owner and many of the places he’d constructed prior are fine. This was just… well… as I said it’s all crummy coincidence. Besides, the remainder of the money was lost, as I said.”

”Right, and speaking of, what type of inheritance was it?” Vector asked. “I mean the type of currency. Rings? Assets? Or perhaps transferred electronically?”

”Actually I believe it was all in jewelry.” Jason mumbled. “Valuable jewels that were passed down from generation to generation without my family realizing how much they were worth. He traded some in to get the rings to finance his construction projects, but the rest he left in their original form so that they might go up in value later.”

”Makes sense.” Vector mused. “So let me get this straight: your grandfather inherited a bunch of old jewelry that gave him enough money to finish his buildings—which are now collapsing—but then was killed in a vehicle accident and the valuables were lost. Am I getting that right?”

”Yes, that’s correct.” Jason agreed carefully.

”…So you agree the crash wasn’t an accident.” Vector said, and Jason started and went a shade paler.

”What? Who said anything about it being a murder? It was all—“

”You just did. You agreed that he was killed—“

”By a *car*, not a mobian.” Jason stood up quickly, dusting himself off sharply. “I don’t know what you are implying, but it is late and I must be mixing up my words. Thank you for all you are doing, but I will be going now. Good night.”

“Wait—aaaand he’s gone.” Vector sighed, pushing himself up reluctantly. “Dang it Jason! Why can’t you just tell me the full truth…?”

Vector cracked the door open to his room, seeing that Espio was already fast asleep in front of his heat lamp, curled up around his new action figure while Charmy was carefully tucked away in his crib, the blankets up to his chin. He smiled at the chameleon’s considerate initiative, yawning and sitting down on the floor as well as he enjoyed the peace and quiet. Who knew he’d end up like this? It almost made him laugh at how if someone had told him a week ago he’d be hiring a ten-year-old ninja chameleon and taking care of a young bee soon he’d’ve said they were crazy, but now here he was and honestly it was something he could probably get used to.

He shook his head. What the heck? What on earth was he thinking?! He was barely in his twenties and living in some ramshackle agency that was likely a health hazard in some way given how old and broken down it was and could hardly afford food for himself as it was! How in the world could he be qualified to take care of two kids?

Yet here he was.

Himself, Espio and Charmy all comfortable sharing their space and somehow making it work, even if it *was* temporary.

He chuckled softly to himself, laying down and tugging a pillow under his head. Of course he had to figure out a long term solution for Espio and Charmy…

But maybe that could wait a little longer.

Chapter End Notes

Ooh, new information and I’m glad Es is finally warming up to his family and getting comfortable!

I’ll try to get the next chapter out Saturday, but this has been my hyper fixation and all my other fics have been sorely neglected lol and enough people are asking so I’m trying to update them rq XD I think I’ve got chapters for 2/4 of them so we’ll see what happens! If not then the next chapter will be out Tuesday <3

Chapter 23: Two Days… Two Events

Chapter Summary

Bang bang bang!

Vector startled awake, Charmy starting to cry as Espio leapt to his feet and snatched up a knife hidden under his heat lamp, which apparently had a shallow stand. The crocodile yawned and forced his tired body to get up, headed towards the door. “Oh for crying out loud—I’ll go see who it is. Es, you stay here and try to calm Charmy.”

”Are you certain you would not like assistance?” Espio asked, eyes narrowed suspiciously, and Vector nodded.

Chapter Notes

Hey everyone, and welcome back to a new chapter! :D Looks like someone’s at the agency door hehe…

As always comments and kudos are greatly appreciated, and I hope you enjoy! ^^

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Bang bang bang!

Vector startled awake, Charmy starting to cry as Espio leapt to his feet and snatched up a knife hidden under his heat lamp, which apparently had a shallow stand. The crocodile yawned and forced his tired body to get up, headed towards the door. “Oh for crying out loud—I’ll go see who it is. Es, you stay here and try to calm Charmy.”

”Are you certain you would not like assistance?” Espio asked, eyes narrowed suspiciously, and Vector nodded.

”I’ll be careful, I promise.” The six-foot crocodile assured him, not really worried about it. He quickly exited the room, yawning and practically stumbling down the stairs to the door. He opened it, trying to maintain some air of professionalism. “Thank you for calling the Chaotix Detective Agency this is Ve… or wait no um… nice to meet you thanks for choosing The Chaotix—“

”Spare me the script, I’m not here to hire you.” Came the firm reply, and Vector frowned at the monkey mobian in a suit and tie standing before him, holding a clipboard and tapping his

pen against it expectantly. Vector straightened, trying to get his groggy brain to comprehend what was happening.

”Oh, my apologies Sir! What can I do for you?” He asked, already getting a bad feeling about the cold, formal eyes staring him down.

”My name is Mr. Alexeev Kuzmin, head director of the Seaside City Child Welfare Department.” He informed him, and Vector immediately stiffened, moving to block the door a bit more efficiently. Child Welfare? Did someone report him or something? Kuzmin continued, “We have received various anonymous tips that you are in the possession of two children you are not the legal guardian of, correct?”

”Um… well…” Vector stammered, swallowing hard before regaining his composure. “Well I’m not sure if I’d put it that way…”

”I am correct.” Kuzmin looked back at his clipboard, and Vector bristled. Why even ask if he was going to be a smart aleck about it? “Based on my information, there is one you call ‘Espio’ who is a young chameleon, and another ‘Charmy’ who is a small bee. Am I correct?”

”Well, you see I—“

”I am correct. Now I’m sure that you are aware that kids their age need a legal guardian, and although we can applaud your efforts at keeping them safe this is for their own good.” Kuzmin glanced down at his clipboard again. He seemed to enjoy doing that, Vector thought irritatedly. “According to state and city law, the proper procedure is…”

”Now hold it right there, Mr. Whatever-Your-Name-Is!” Vector snapped before clenching his jaw at Kuzmin’s raising eyebrow. “Sorry, I meant no disrespect, but you don’t know these kids. How could this possibly be best for them?”

”I understand your worries, but I can assure you that we will make sure they are placed either in a safe orphanage or with a loving foster family in our system.” Kuzmin told him in monotone, which wasn’t reassuring in the least. “Children should not be left unattended or unaccounted for, and of course the reason they are on their own needs to be documented for our own records and other safety purposes.”

Vector felt his chest tightening. Okay, this was fine. There was no need to panic, and this was probably for the best! But it felt so… sudden. Where had all this come from? “With all due respect, you don’t know these kids. Charmy is finally settling in and there’s no way Espio would just go with you!”

”I see you’ve grown attached. That is perfectly understandable, and if you wish you can go through the proper background checks and processes to move towards becoming a foster parent yourself.” Kuzmin tapped his pen again, and the sound grated on Vector’s ears. “However unfortunately I believe it will be too late for you to obtain these particular children.”

”Obtain? You sound like you’re talkin’ about items at a grocery store to buy and sell!” Vector growled, patience wearing thin. “They aren’t numbers on that stupid clipboard of yours to

just be moved around and updated into a system!"

"Sir, please keep this professional." Kuzmin insisted. "Now I only came by to confirm our tip, and now that I am aware of the situation I will begin proceedings immediately."

"What proceedings?" Vector glared. "You don't understand—they need help!"

"And we will get them help, just not with you." Kuzmin told him firmly. "As for the continuation of this process, we will have a long-term situation ready by the end of the week, wherever that may be. As for now I would like to collect them and take them to—"

"Nope, not happening." Vector crossed his arms, bristling and straightening to his full height. Kuzmin looked up at him in bemusement.

"Unfortunately this is not your choice, Mr. Crocodile. Please be reasonable." The monkey began, but Vector held up a hand.

"Save the crap. Once you an prove to me that you've got a good place ready where they will be taken care of then… then I'll let them go with you." Vector narrowed his eyes. "Until then there's no way in chaos that I'm lettin' ya into this agency."

"I am a professional, Mr. Crocodile. What qualifies you to host two children better than myself and the Child Welfare system?"

"How about familiarity?" Vector challenged. "I doubt it's good for a kid to be moved around so much, and they feel safe here!"

"What is going on?" Jason nearly choked when he came to the door and saw the monkey on the doorstep, straightening his suit and chuckling. "My my, I didn't expect any visitors. Is there anything I can help with?"

"I am just informing Mr. Crocodile here that I will be collecting the two children now." Kuzmin told him firmly, eyes boring into the lizard. Jason hesitated, eyes darting back and forth.

"You… you are…?" His gaze dropped to the clipboard and welfare badge, understanding dawning. "Oh…oh I see."

"No he's not! I'm not lettin' him in until I've got proof my boys are gonna be taken care of!" Vector snapped.

"*Your* boys?" Kuzmin asked, and Vector grimaced.

"Well, well not *mine* mine, but still I… uh…" Vector stammered, but to his surprise Jason placed a comforting hand on his shoulder and faced the monkey.

"Mr. Kuzmin, I'm sure that you can see how attached these three have gotten and would agree that it would be simply cruel to uproot these children from such a caring home so suddenly." He informed him, and Kuzmin's eyes narrowed. Jason began to sweat slightly but continued, "I do not mean to overstep my place, but as a father myself I would never *ever*

want a child or their parent to be forcibly separated, knowing the grief it would cause. Is there any time you can give the Chaotix to prepare for such a change?"

"You're pushing it, Mr. Lizard." Kuzmin grit, and Jason tensed.

"I know, Sir, but please have some compassion if only on the kids." He offered a smile. "I myself had only been here for a couple of days but I can assure you that they will be safe here and that Vector is a very caring and responsible guardian. Besides that there is already a police perimeter around the agency! Is there absolutely anything you can do?"

The monkey hesitated. "… I can give you until the end of the week, no later. But until then we will be monitoring this place very closely to ensure the children are not stolen away."

"Thank you, Sir!" Jason grinned and nudged Vector. "Vector? Anything you want to say?"

The crocodile was hardly listening, mind reeling. He was losing Charmy and Espio at the end of the week? Sure he knew this whole situation couldn't be permanent, but why would fate decide to uproot them so soon? Charmy would be sad but likely quickly adapt, but Espio? Vector's heart ached—he'd done everything he possibly could to make that kid feel welcome there, and all for what? Just to have him ripped away again? Espio was *finally* starting to warm up, but Vector knew he'd never stay with some random family for long. How much had the chameleon gone through before Vector had stumbled upon that ghost case? Abuse? Physical or mental? Abandonment? Grief? The kid was ten for crying out loud!

Jason cleared his throat, and Vector looked over. "Vector? Are you…"

"I'm fine. Thanks for the extra time, I appreciate it." Vector frowned. Today was Thursday, so that only gave him two days if Kuzmin planned to take them on Saturday.

"I have some more reports I need to file anyway." Kuzmin turned around, pausing briefly to glance over his shoulder at Vector. "I suggest you take this time to prepare yourself and not to grow more attached—the deadline is final."

"I… will." Vector agreed reluctantly, and Kuzmin finally got into the back seat of a sleek black car that drove off swiftly. The crocodile sighed. "Thanks, Jason."

"I know it… has to be done, but I hope this gives you all more time to prepare mentally." The lizard told him. "And what say you if you all drop the case and spend more time together?"

"What?" Vector's head snapped up. "But what about—"

"This is more important. I will be fine." Jason told him. "The kids need to readapt to family life."

"But we're not…"

"With all due respect, Vector, you'd have to be an idiot not to see it." Jason chuckled. "I've seen the way you three interact, and I can also recognize that fierce protectiveness in your eyes when the pizzeria came down, or when Mr. Kuzmin came to collect them. You might not be a family by blood, but anyone with a good head on their shoulders knows that that

doesn't matter in the slightest." He patted Vector's shoulder. "Spend time with your sons, Vector. They need it."

Vector stared at Jason a long moment before the sound of buzzing drew his attention along with a familiar shout from Espio. He let out a fond huff, glancing over to see the kids hurrying down the steps, Espio looking peeved as Charmy flew. "Charmy! Come here!"

"It's okay, Es." Vector laughed and embraced Charmy's hug, spinning him around. "Heya bud, good to see you too."

"My apologies, Vector. It appears that he has figured out the door handle." Espio looked down, and Vector's eyes softened.

"Don't worry about it, it was just… some salesman wanting me to buy a vacuum." Vector lied, and Jason glanced over at him sharply. "But what do you guys say we take another day off, huh? Maybe another trip to the library? I've got a card if you want to check out some books and bring them home, Es."

Espio's eyes brightened slightly, tail flicking before he hesitated. "Perhaps… some other time. I think it is best that we work on the case, as that is due at the end of the week when the police perimeter will be discontinued."

Vector grimaced. Crap, Espio was right. Two big events due at the end of the week, but how could Vector dissuade the chameleon without revealing the truth and having him run off? "Right um… maybe we could do both? Have a little fun and solve the case as well?"

"Is everything alright? You are not acting like yourself." Espio tilted his head, and Vector clenched his jaw. Was it really that obvious? He was a detective, so he needed to act like it!

"Yeah… sorry, you're right. We should try to figure some things out. Why don't you take Charmy inside and I'll be there in a minute?" He asked, and Espio nodded, taking the little bee from Vector and heading inside.

Once he was out of sight Jason sighed. "I understand your hesitation to tell him, Vector, but he will find out eventually."

"I know." Vector watched the spot where Espio had disappeared, jaw clenching. "I just… don't want to to be true."

Chapter End Notes

Yikes, better get your act together Vector! You gotta protect your boys!

Next chapter out Tuesday, so see ya then! ^^

Chapter 24: New Discoveries

Chapter Summary

”Are you certain it was a good idea to leave Charmy at the agency with that stranger?” Espio asked doubtfully, and Vector nodded, looking around to ensure they were alone.

”Yeah, he was sleeping and Miss Vanilla was recommended by an old buddy of mine as an excellent babysitter.” Vector hesitated, thinking back to his brief interaction with the kind rabbit woman. She had been very calm-natured which put Vector at ease and was also more than a little good-looking as well.

He actually doubted he’d ever seen such a beautiful woman.

Chapter Notes

Hey everyone, and Happy Chaotix Tuesday! I hope you enjoy the chapter… it’s time for some more detective work…

▶ TW spoilers under the cut! ^^

As always comments and kudos are greatly appreciated! It’s been so fun to read all the theories… >:3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

”Are you certain it was a good idea to leave Charmy at the agency with that stranger?” Espio asked doubtfully, and Vector nodded, looking around to ensure they were alone.

”Yeah, he was sleeping and Miss Vanilla was recommended by an old buddy of mine as an excellent babysitter.” Vector hesitated, thinking back to his brief interaction with the kind rabbit woman. She had been very calm-natured which put Vector at ease and was also more than a little good-looking as well.

He actually doubted he’d ever seen such a beautiful woman.

He shook himself slightly, trying to focus on the case at hand. Vanilla had mentioned she had a young daughter around Charmy’s age and his friend had said she was extremely trustworthy and kind so the crocodile had hired her, but how could he explain all the complications and exceptions there were to the stranger rule? He sighed. “Hopefully it all works out, and Jason is also there if something goes south. But right now we need to investigate that rubble.”

”Right.” Espio frowned at the police tape surrounding the collapsed pizzeria. “Why is there a yellow ribbon bordering the site?”

”That’s just some caution tape the cops put up so no one tampers with the crime scene.” Vector explained. “I think they can tell by now that this isn’t coincidence.”

”So… are we not permitted to go in?”

”Well uh… not *technically*, but we’re not going to break or mess with anything. We’re just going to poke around a bit to see what we can find.”

”Duly noted. They will not be able to detect my presence here.”

”That’s the spirit! Now I don’t see anyone, so let’s get going.” Vector led the way over to the pile of rubble, exhilaration filling his chest. It was finally time for some real, hard-boiled detective work! And sure it was only distracting him from the fact that someone was going to come take away his boys in a couple days but…

He shook himself. He couldn’t afford to think about any of that right now—he needed to make sure Espio stayed in his sight for even one more day. He was a detective, after all, and surely he could find the kid again if he ran and then keep it all on the down-low so that no one tried to take him again. Or maybe Espio would be placed with a loving family that he’d enjoy staying with, but that option was highly unlikely.

”What are we searching for, Vector?” Espio asked as he scanned the ruins, and Vector took a deep breath to bring himself back to the present.

”Anything out of the ordinary, really. Something that isn’t in your usual pizzeria.” Vector told him, lifting up a chuck of roofing to look underneath. “So like no kitchen utensils or plates or oven… stuff, but anything else we should check out.”

”Understood.” Espio replied, methodically moving through the rubble and keeping his eyes low. Vector had to hand it to the kid—he was light on his feet and quick, allowing him to search more efficiently and safely look around places the six-foot crocodile could not. If Espio was this good at reaching smaller places then imagine how great Charmy would be! Or… not since Vector only had a few more days with them but… ugh he couldn’t let himself keep thinking about that! He needed to solve this case quickly and hopefully still have time to spare so he could spend it with the boys.

”Vector, over here.” Espio called, and Vector jumped slightly. Oh dang nabbit he zoned out again! Espio tilted his head, eyes searching. “Are you alright? You seem unfocused.”

”Yeah, sorry Es. Just a lot on my mind.” Vector replied sheepishly, and the kid straightened a bit, climbing down from the pile he was examining to come over.

”To clear one’s mind one must let go of the past and live in the present.” He said, and Vector blinked. “Look around you. We are on a mission, and our only objective at this particular moment in time is to find anything of use to us. Hear my voice, feel the ground beneath your feet, see the ruined structure. This is all that matters right now.”

Vector clenched his jaw, knowing that his objective was double-sided. Espio sighed. “Vector, how can you expect to move forward if you dwell on too much worry about what will be instead of remaining grounded in what is?”

”Don’t worry about it, Es. It’s not that deep, heh, but I appreciate your help.” Vector tried, and Espio stiffened.

”If you set your sights on fantasies of your mind then you will not see threats outside it.” The chameleon turned away sharply, and Vector could’ve kicked himself. This must be triggering for the kid somehow, and Vector needed to be more careful when Espio spoke up or reacted to various things. He mentally noted ‘aversion to unfocus’ and took a deep breath.

”Yeah, you’re right Es. Thanks.” He followed the chameleon tentatively. “What was it you were wanting to show me?”

”I only saw a distinct shine from underneath a large chunk of the wall. Perhaps it was cutlery, but from the peculiar hue I have deduced that it might not be silver.” Espio explained, gesturing to a pile of rubble. Vector nodded.

”Good eye. Now let’s have a look here…” The crocodile braced himself, taking a firm grip on either side of the debris and lifting with all his might. Espio crawled under and Vector’s heart dropped, putting everything he had into not losing his grip. “Well? Anything under there?”

”Yes.” Came the chameleon’s voice from right behind Vector, who yelped and dropped the wall with a crash. Espio gave him a strange look, standing calmly and silently a safe distance away, before holding up a delicate golden chain with an amethyst stone buried in the pendent dangling from the necklace. “Would this be included in the ‘anything peculiar’ bounds you have set?”

”A… necklace?” Vector frowned, taking the jewelry from Espio and examining it. “Well it might’ve just been on one of the guests, you know? But geez this thing looks old… it’s all coated in dust and hasn’t been polished in…” The crocodile lapsed into silence, reading the date stamped into the back of the pendent.

It was the same year the buildings were built.

”Wait, wait wait wait Espio I’m going to lift up this wall again, see if there’s anything else under there.” Vector hurriedly set the necklace aside and grabbed the wall, straining to lift it high. Espio dutifully returned to searching, Vector’s mind reeling. Could this be a part of the inheritance? Or maybe even the *lost* part of the inheritance? But what was it doing here?

”Yes, there are quite a few pieces down here.” He called, and Vector’s heart leaped. “There’s a bracelet, more necklaces, some pearls, earrings…”

”Yes yes, perfect!” Vector told him, muscles aching. “Just bring it all out and—“

Click.

The crocodile tensed as he heard the telltale loading of a gun, chest squeezing. “Es? Kid… did you hear that?”

”If you are referring to the strange clicking sound, I am unfamiliar with it’s origins.” Espio replied. “There’s a lot more jewelry if I just dig a bit deeper…”

Oh chaos…

”Espio, listen to me very closely.” He said in a low voice, and he heard Espio stiffen. “Get out from under there *right now*. We can always come back.”

”Why?” Espio asked. “Our mission could be completed if I could only have a few more moments…”

”No!” Vector snapped, and immediately regretted it as Espio went quiet. “Sorry just… listen, I think we might be in danger. Can you go invisible at least? Then come out and get behind me.”

”If we are in danger then why would I get behind you? If something comes toward us then it would only hit you first.”

”Yeah that’s the idea!” Vector grit out. “Just do it Es, okay? And hurry—I don’t know how much longer I can hold this up. Espio? ESPIO!”

Vector peeked underneath to find the crater absent, and he slowly lowered the wall to make sure the invisible mobian wasn’t still under it. He whirled around, tail thrashing in agitation. “Espio? Espio this is serious! This isn’t like Dr. Eggman—if someone has a gun then they could easily kill either one of us—“

CRACK!

Vector jumped slightly at the deafening sound of the weapon being fired, stomach rolling in fear at the deathly silence that followed. “Espio? ESPIO! ESPIO WHERE ARE YOU—“

The crocodile was going to be sick. His desperate eyes scanned the empty scene before him, stumbling around with his hands out to hopefully feel his friend alive and not trip over a body on the ground. He let out a strangled yelp when he felt someone grab his arm and Espio flickered into view, looking around warily.

”I believe that was a warning shot—any marksman worth their weapon would’ve injured either of us easily…” He began, but stiffened when Vector wrapped him in a crushing hug. The crocodile whimpered slightly in relief that the kid was uninjured, not really caring about boundaries at the moment as tears came to his eyes. Oh crap he shouldn’t cry like this right now but… but *dang* he’d never been shot at before and then not immediately seeing Espio…

”You can’t keep *doing* that to me, kid!” Vector choked out, pulling back slightly to look into Espio’s eyes. “No more running off by yourself when we’re in danger, okay? You nearly gave me a heart attack!”

”I’m *not* a…”

”Yeah yeah, sorry Es. Let’s just get out of here!” Vector scooped a protesting Espio up into his arms as he ran, trying to shield him as much as possible as he focused on putting distance between himself and whoever it was shooting at them.

”*Da kak zhe tak*… you missed.”

”The chameleon was correct. I was only trying to ward them away. Do you know how many ridiculous cops would be on our trail if they found a body shot near this site?”

”Point taken. But they were getting too close.”

”They’re already too close. I swear that gumshoes don’t know when to quit, but I already have a plan for that and it’s already in motion.”

”Excellent foresight.”

”I know. We’ll finish what we started and there’s no way that two detectives and some baby are going to stop us.”

”Vector! Welcome back!” Vanilla greeted when the crocodile all but crashed through the door way, panting and still holding Espio tightly as his heart hammered. “Is… everything okay?”

”Vector, put me down!” Espio protested, but Vector was hardly listening. He cleared his throat, trying to get past his still-frazzled nerves.

”Hey Vanilla. Thanks for watching Charmy for us—YEOUCH!” Vector yelped when Espio twisted his arm, dropping the chameleon who landed deftly on his feet. He chuckled sheepishly. “Right, sorry Espio.”

”How is Charmy?” Espio asked, eyeing the lop-eared rabbit suspiciously. Vanilla smiled.

”He’s sleeping upstairs. He woke up once asking for you two but I read him one of the stories I brought and he was able to fall back asleep.” She hesitated, eyeing both of their ragged appearances. “Did your outing go well? You two look more than a little worse for wear…”

”Well Vector called it a gu—“ Espio began, but Vector quickly interjected.

”Hehehe, yep! Everything’s a-okay here. Nothing to be worried about.” Vector offered a grin. “Just, uh, got a bit dirty when looking for some stuff. No biggie.”

”Well I hope you found what you were looking for.” Vanilla stifled a yawn, and Vector blushed a bit. She was cute when she did that. “I do believe I left everything in order so I’ll be taking my leave now. It was wonderful meeting you two and I hope we cross paths again sometime! I know my daughter Cream would just love playing with Charmy.”

”I know he would like that too.” Vector nodded, tail swaying unintentionally in a little wag. “Yeah, um, thank you again, Vanilla. Have a good night.”

Once she left Espio turned to look at him askance. “Why did you lie again, especially if you are attracted to her?”

”Huh wha—what? Me?” Vector stammered. “I just… well… just go and check on Charmy. I have some stuff to finish up in the office before I head to bed.”

”Very well.” Espio shrugged and started up the stairs, Vector sighing.

”Geez, I really need to get my head together.”

Chapter End Notes

Whelp it looks like we’ve got some new developments! As well as someone after our boys… also Vanilla jumpscare lol! XD

Next chapter out Thursday, so see ya then! ^^

Chapter 25: Reading Aloud

Chapter Summary

> Vector's leg bounced up and down as he pulled up various research tabs on his computer, phantom anxiety of not immediately seeing Espio after that shot haunting him. It was fine! Everything had turned out okay, so why was he still so on edge? Just the thought of what could've happened… the intrusive imagining of a bullet finding it's mark in the kid's chest…

Chapter Notes

> Hey everyone, and welcome back to a new chapter! I hope you enjoy!
>
> As always comments and kudos are greatly appreciated <333

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Vector's leg bounced up and down as he pulled up various research tabs on his computer, phantom anxiety of not immediately seeing Espio after that shot haunting him. It was fine! Everything had turned out okay, so why was he still so on edge? Just the thought of what could've happened… the intrusive imagining of a bullet finding it's mark in the kid's chest…

Vector shuddered, shaking his head and trying once again to focus on the task at hand. Espio was safe upstairs with Charmy now and that was all that mattered. He took a deep breath and squinted at the webpage he'd pulled up regarding the buildings once again as well as Monroe the Lizard's construction service. His internet was appallingly slow (seriously why didn't the neighbors have better WiFi?) but it was all he had so he kept his eyes on the text that little-by-little finally materialized. As he already knew all the buildings were completed around the same year, but right now he was looking for anything closer.

There were articles of the lost inheritance… notes about how the construction received a leap forward in production… there! Vector leaned forward in his seat as he saw the article about all the walls going up. Of course some of the buildings had more decorative work to do which caused them to take longer, but it appeared that all the main walls of the structures were completed almost simultaneously, within a week or two before Monroe died. That was something, right? Vector's eyes darted back and forth as he thought, trying to piece together the clues.

Monroe the Lizard received a large inheritance of jewelry.

He then completed the walls of his buildings fairly quickly.

Then he was killed in an accident while the rest of his projects were finished.

Years later his grandson was now falling victim to all of those said buildings collapsing nearly on top of him.

And now they found some of the jewelry that might be a part of the inheritance in the rubble…

Vector groaned and grabbed his head. He needed to think! Could the lost inheritance be *inside* the buildings somehow? But why would anyone in their right mind immediately close off their resources unless… the crocodile suddenly sat up straight.

Unless someone was after them.

Was he on the right track? Had someone been trying to steal the inheritance? But then why would they kill Monroe if he was the only one who knew where it was? Unless the lizard had hid the rest of the fortune in foresight *before* he was killed without telling anyone… and then his murderer was left to realize that he had sealed his own fate… and now was just taking down all the buildings as a last resort after maybe stumbling upon the idea by chance or discovering something Vector didn't know yet…

But then how did Jason play into all of this? Was it really just terrible coincidence that he was in the wrong places at the wrong times?

Or… or the *right* places.

Did Jason just happen to frequent all his grandfather's buildings? Of course Monroe's company had helped construct the majority of Seaside City, but what if there was more to it? Maybe he was also looking for the money, but why put himself in so much danger? Despite knowing that he didn't have the full picture, Vector believed himself to be generally good with reading people and believed that Jason truly did love his family and wanted them all safe. So why would he ever purposefully mingle with such a deadly mystery? One of the building collapses had even taken off his tail!

But if both the lizard and the mystery killer were looking for the same inheritance then what were the chances they always ended up at the same buildings at the same times? There were multiple of them, so why did the timing always line up?

It didn't make any *sense*.

A small, distant whine drew his attention upstairs, and he glanced at the door of his office. Charmy must be awake and giving Espio some trouble… at least the kid had Vanilla to watch him but still he probably wanted those he was more familiar with. Vector sighed and shut down his old computer, yawning and decided to give his brain a little rest and go back at it again fresh tomorrow.

His boys needed him.

He got up and made his way out to the stairs, climbing them and headed towards their room. He smiled slightly, eyes creasing fondly as he heard muffled sounds of a struggle from inside and saw the doorknob rattling. He finally opened the door to see Espio struggling to hold Charmy back without hurting him, tail flicking in concentration. The chameleon glanced over at Vector, tensing slightly. “My apologies if we disturbed you.”

”Don’t worry about it, Es. You know I could never be mad at you two.” Vector chuckled as Charmy was released and shot over towards him like a little fuzzy projectile. “Heya bud.”

”Vector!” Charmy squealed in delight, nuzzling into the crocodile’s chest as his little wings fluttered happily. Vector grinned and sat down on the floor, the bee contentedly in his lap. “‘Spio mean.”

”It’s not *’mean’* to attempt to teach you respect for those above you.” Espio scowled, and Vector glanced over.

”Heh, I don’t really think of you guys below me or anything.” The crocodile commented, and Espio looked away.

”Well, you are my boss, and Charmy is a child.” The chameleon muttered, and Vector hesitated. Finally he shrugged and reached over for the book box, feeling Espio’s eyes turn to him as he picked up one of his old Hardy Boys books and flipped to the first page.

”You don’t have to listen if you don’t want Es, but I think Charmy might like a bedtime story. I should probably pick up some younger-level stories, but this’ll do for now.” Vector said casually, and once Charmy was properly settled in his lap he began to read from the beginning.

Charmy giggled at some of the voices he attempted to do, and although he didn’t know if that meant they were good or bad at least the kid was having a good time. Gradually Espio scooted closer, peering over Vector’s shoulder to read along as the crocodile entertained them, Vector hiding a smile. Even when Charmy fell asleep he kept reading for Espio, pretending not to notice the way the chameleon yawned and settled down next to him, still tiredly following along in the book.

Soon enough Vector felt a gentle pressure on his shoulder and froze, heart pounding as he glanced over to see Espio fast asleep and leaning against him for support. The poor kid was probably so tired he didn’t even realize it, but still it warmed Vector’s heart. He slowly set the book aside and tentatively leaned against his bed frame, Charmy in his lap and Espio against his side.

His two boys.

Home.

Vector carefully wrapped an arm around Espio, watching as the kid subconsciously leaned into his warmth. He looked so… small. Those keen golden eyes of his were no longer darting about warily but now closed as he finally rested, vulnerable and safe. How long had it even been since Espio joined the agency? Five days? Maybe six? And yet the kid was already

settling in and finally feeling safe for the first time in who knew how long. Vector hated just thinking about what he probably went through before the agency, but at least he was safe now.

Or… mostly safe.

The crocodile shuddered, thinking back once more to that gunshot. Who the heck had fired at them? Was it the same guy collapsing the buildings? Someone else after the loot? And who in chaos would shoot at a ten-year-old kid? Vector glanced down at the sleeping chameleon, jaw clenched. Maybe that CPS agent was on the right track—this was no job for mobians so young. But there was something strange about Alexeev Kuzmin, and Vector almost got the nagging feeling that they'd met before. But that was ridiculous, right? Where in the world would he have crossed paths with someone like that?

A sleepy sigh from Charmy drew his mind back to the present and he yawned, leaning back against the bed and closing his eyes.

The mystery could wait.

He should make the most of the time with his boys while it lasted.

Espio yawned slightly, feeling his tired mind begin it's gradual journey to the waking world. Strange, he hadn't had any nightmares.

But he *always* had nightmares.

Whether about his father or his brothers or even Riku or Yuki…

Espio peeked an eye open, surprised at seeing a faint light through the window. Had he really slept through the night? The chameleon yawned, the peaceful atmosphere attempting to lull him back to sleep as he nuzzled into the warmth next to him…

Espio stiffened, eyes popping open wide as he realized that the warmth was coming from Vector and Charmy, fast asleep next to him. Charmy's mouth was hanging open, drool dripping from the side of his mouth as he clung to the chameleon like a koala while Vector was curled up around them both protectively, snoring loudly. Espio felt his muscles tense at all the close contact, breath hitching, but at the same time it was kind of… nice. Comforting even, knowing that all three of them were willingly sharing space and trusting that they were safe with each other.

The feeling was so foreign, though not entirely unwelcome.

He tentatively relaxed, keeping his eyes trained on Vector's sleeping face. The crocodile didn't stir, and Espio finally settled back down with a soft sigh.

Perhaps he could rest a little longer before getting up.

Chapter End Notes

Awwwwwww family bonding time!! Such a precious moment… it would be such a shame if something were to… ruin it… but nahhhhhh why would anything like that ever happen to such a sweet found family?? ;3

Next chapter out Saturday, so see ya then! ^^

Chapter 26: To Find Something That Doesn't Belong

Chapter Summary

> Vector yawned, trudging down the stairs with Charmy still nuzzled into the crook of his arm. "Es? You down here bud?" The crocodile stopped in his steps, blinking in bewilderment at the sight of Jason already in a suit and hand on the doorknob. "Woah, um, Jason? Where ya goin'?"
>
> "Oh, you know! Just one more errand to run by the end of the week." The lizard chuckled. "I'll be back soon."

Chapter Notes

> Hey everyone, and welcome to a new chapter! Hehehehehe I love reading all your theories in the comments… y'all were getting quite close… hehehehehehehehehe… ;)
>
> As always comments and kudos are greatly appreciated and I hope you enjoy! ^^

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Vector yawned, trudging down the stairs with Charmy still nuzzled into the crook of his arm. "Es? You down here bud?" The crocodile stopped in his steps, blinking in bewilderment at the sight of Jason already in a suit and hand on the doorknob. "Woah, um, Jason? Where ya goin'?"

"Oh, you know! Just one more errand to run by the end of the week." The lizard chuckled. "I'll be back soon."

"Really? This early in the morning?"

"Well, to be completely honest I knew you wouldn't want me to leave."

"You can bet your boots I don't want you to leave!" Vector exclaimed, freezing as Charmy let out a sleepy whine and lowering his voice. "Look, can the errand wait? We've only got one more day before the police perimeter is down, and honestly I think we're really close to solving this case for ya!"

"You… are?" Jason asked slowly, and Vector nodded enthusiastically.

"You bet! It turns out…" Vector hesitated, recalling that Jason himself might be more closely tied to the case than he thought. He cleared his throat. "…That we all make a good team and

I'm sure we'll make more progress soon. But speaking of, where were ya going?"

"Oh, nowhere special." Jason shrugged vaguely.

"Aww, don't worry. You can tell me." Vector smiled encouragingly, and Jason clenched his jaw. "Unless something else is going on that you'd like to enlighten me on…?"

"No, nothing like that." Jason sighed. "If you must know, it's just this abandoned store outside of town."

"Abandoned, huh? And what're ya plannin' on doing down there if ya don't mind me asking?"

"I've got nothing to hide. I am going to scout it out to see if I could remodel it into another retail franchise." Jason told him after a moment's hesitation, and Vector nodded.

"I…see." Vector went silent for a moment, brain whirring. "And um… does anyone, uh, *know* you're going there?"

"Maybe a contractor or two. Why?"

"'Cause I wanna test somethin'." Vector told him, already forming a plan in his head. "How would ya feel about me goin' over there instead to take a look around?"

Jason started. "What? Why would you…?"

"If this is all 'bad luck', then the building shouldn't collapse on me, right?" Vector asked, and Jason swallowed hard. *A sign he's hiding something*, Vector though to himself. "And if it isn't luck then there's somethin' special about your schedule or the buildin's you're going to. I'm also willin' to bet that this one was also finalized within the same time frame as the others, correct? And that your grandfather built it?"

"I… I suppose so…"

"Wonderful! Now let's go see if we can find a common denominator here." Vector grinned. "I'll call up Vanilla to watch Charmy again and—"

"Wait, I never agreed to such a thing. How can I inspect a building based on your word alone?" Jason protested, and Vector sighed.

"Look Jason, are you sure that project can't wait? I just want to go see if anything happens if you were set on going there." Vector told him. "Don't you *want* this case solved?"

"Of course, but I…" Jason shook his head. "Forgive me, this is all just so sudden."

"We're detectives, Jason! It's our job to be spontaneous and flexible." Vector almost chuckled to himself at referring to the agency as something containing multiple members but shook it off. "Once Vanilla gets here then we can head out, and if something happens along the way we'll be the first to know about it."

Jason tilted his head. “Vanilla is that rabbit woman who came over yesterday, correct? Do you know her well?”

”Well, not exactly.” Vector frowned. “Why?”

”Well you sound almost… giddy saying her name.” Jason told him.

”Why does everyone keep bringin’ that up?” Vector took a deep breath. “Well, maybe we can get to know each other a bit better sometime. But right now I need to find Es and then we’re gonna go crack this case.”

Espio slowly crept into Jason’s room, silent and completely invisible. He could hear the lizard mobian downstairs talking with Vector so he had a little bit of time at least and he intended to make the most of it.

Of course, since Jason was only staying with them a week, he only had a couple suitcases to look through, which was good since he was short on time. The chameleon gingerly walked around both of them, noticing the locks with a grimace. Was it common to lock one’s suitcase? Or was Jason truly hiding something as he suspected? They were so small… all he had were bulky knives since apparently no one in seaside city just left kunai or shurikens lying around. But maybe…

Espio looked around the room, trying to figure something out. Who knew when Jason would be back up? The chameleon finally nodded to himself and walked over to the corner of the room, prying up a loose floorboard to retrieve one of his knives and use it to dig at the wood. Once he had managed to carve out two slivers from the already-splintering material he returned to the locks and got to work. The larger one seemed more promising since it was heavier and could contain more he could look through if Jason came up and cut his time short, so that was what Espio went for.

Soon enough the lock had sprung and Espio’s tail flicked in satisfaction, glad his skills weren’t deteriorating. He silently opened the suitcase, rifling through the various clothing items in search of anything out of the ordinary. What was it Vector had said? To look for anything that wasn’t supposed to be there? He thought back to the bathroom of the agency, recalling how two new toothbrushes had mysteriously appeared (Espio knew that Vector must’ve bought them) along with a few other toiletries. So those were probably to be expected along with various button-up shirts and ties (again, Espio didn’t see those as necessities but Jason seemed to enjoy putting himself together in the morning). So he didn’t quite know what he was looking for but hoped he would know when he saw it…

Just like right there.

An old book, it’s leather title-less cover worn and fraying at the edges. Curious, Espio carefully picked it up and opened it, realizing that the pages were filled not with fine print but with *writing*. It was a strange blend of messy and cursive, the telltale script of someone thinking faster than they could write yet still formal at heart. The chameleon squinted at the words, trying to make out the first entry he flipped to.

'Production on my projects has been slow, and I can tell that the mayor of Seaside City is getting impatient. The problem lies in the fact that the majority of funding comes from taxpayers, yet we won't get any more residents until we expand. I am stuck between a rock and a hard place, yet I have hope that with enough strategic minimizing of our costs we will be able to complete the main buildings on schedule.'

Espio frowned at the signed name at the bottom. 'Monroe the Lizard'. Was this his own journal then? It didn't seem like a work of fiction, so perhaps some people enjoyed narrating their life into writing, whether for future reference or self-entertainment Espio didn't really know. He flipped further in and tilted his head when he noticed the entries abruptly end. What the… perhaps this was indeed a chronological account of Monroe's commentary. The chameleon eyed the dates curiously, flipping to the most recent one, slightly surprised to see the writing scrawled and the words brief.

'To my future decedents, I never meant for it to be this way but I leave you with this: Livaldi's Pizzeria, Johnson's Retail Establishment, Old Rusty's Auto Repair, Burgers and Biscuits All-Day Diner—'

Espio jumped slightly when he heard footsteps, quickly shoving the notebook back into the suitcase without reading the last names on the list. He zipped it up as silently as he could, snapping the lock back in place and hurrying out, unseen by Jason returning to his room. He practically flew downstairs, mind reeling. Those were all the locations collapsing! Except for Old Rusty's Auto Repair… that was the one name he didn't recognize. Of course there were also the final addresses he hadn't gotten a chance to read, but he'd seen enough and needed to tell Vector.

"Vector!" He exclaimed, appearing right behind the startled crocodile.

"Espio! Geez, there's no need to go invisible around the office unless you want to scare me out of my skin!" The crocodile shook his head. "But never mind that, I was just about to look for you. We need to—"

"Vector, I found a notebook in Jason's room." Espio interrupted, and Vector fell silent in surprise. "It was written by Monroe."

"You did… what? You went into Jason's *room*?" Vector put both his hands to his head. "But that's—"

"No different then crossing the police border, correct?" Espio asked, and Vector sighed.

"We'll… discuss that later. Did you find something?"

"Yes. His final entry was a list of sites, all of which have collapsed except for *one*." Espio met Vector's eyes. "Is there an 'Old Rusty's Auto Repair' shop nearby?"

"Hm… never heard of it." Vector hurried over to the computer and pulled up the name. "Oh, it looks like it closed years ago. But I'm willing to bet… yep, right here. That's where Jason was headed, and that's where we're goin' now."

”We… are?” Espio tilted his head and Vector nodded.

”Yep! We’re gonna go bust that luck theory and figure out who’s *really* behind this mystery!” Vector grinned. “Come on, Es! Let’s go!”

Chapter End Notes

Whelp, surely nothing bad can happen in the next chapter, right? Just a normal stakeout… no biggie…

Next chapter out Tuesday, so see ya then! ^^

Chapter 27: Tak ty govorish’ po-russki?

Chapter Summary

> “See anything yet, Es?” Vector called, shining his flashlight around the old building. It truly was abandoned in both occupants and upkeep—the floorboards were rotting and covered with dust and dead bugs, the wallpaper was peeling to reveal the yellowish stains beneath, and somewhere Vector could detect the faint dripping of a leaky pipe. Somehow the atmosphere invigorated him though, and he couldn’t help but grin at the excitement.

Chapter Notes

> Hey everyone, and welcome to a new chapter of The Art of Espionage!! Time for some fun stakeout action… hehe… just a fun normal stakeout… probably… buckle up! :3
>
> ▶ Major TW spoilers under the cut
>
> As always comments and kudos are greatly appreciated, and I hope you enjoy! ^^

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“See anything yet, Es?” Vector called, shining his flashlight around the old building. It truly was abandoned in both occupants and upkeep—the floorboards were rotting and covered with dust and dead bugs, the wallpaper was peeling to reveal the yellowish stains beneath, and somewhere Vector could detect the faint dripping of a leaky pipe. Somehow the atmosphere invigorated him though, and he couldn’t help but grin at the excitement.

”Not yet, Vector.” Espio called back, and Vector glanced over at the walls. What were they supposed to do if no one showed up? Could they get away with taking a peek inside the walls maybe? That would prove that Jason was going to somewhere with the jewels again, but that the bad guy was following *him* specifically and not racing him for the inheritance. But if someone did show up?

Then he’d be ready to get some answers.

”Yeah, all clear over here too.” Vector hesitated slightly as Espio ventured further into the building. “Just stay where I can see you, okay Es? And please stay visible so I can see you in general.”

”True, staying close would give us strength in numbers.” Espio agreed, and Vector sighed in relief. Good thing the chameleon saw his request as reasonable rather than patronizing, and it gave the crocodile some peace of mind as he turned away.

Suddenly a strange, unexplained rustling whispered out briefly and Vector tensed, whipping around to shine his light around the room as Espio eyed him quizzically. “Is… everything okay Vector?”

”Yeah just… just thought I heard something.” Vector slowly turned away, the phantom sound of a gunshot ringing in his mind. It had been so unexpected and there was no way it would happen a second time, right? “On second thought, maybe you should stay invisible Espio. Just please stay close.”

”Very well.” Espio commented, and he vanished from sight. Vector felt a strange combination of relief and anxiety, having to trust the kid to stay in a reasonable range. But at least no one would be able to aim at him if there *was* someone in there, so Vector nodded and turned away.

There it was again! It was so subtle that it was easily missed but the detective’s nerves were already all over the place so it made him jump and whip around.

”Hello?” Vector’s eyes darted back and forth, nearly jumping out of his skin when a large brown rat skittered across the floor and vanished into another room. The crocodile’s heart was hammering, shining his light across the room warily. “Es? You still there?”

”Yes Vector.” Espio called out, and Vector sighed.

”Good. Now let’s just keep searching.” Vector frowned at the walls. “Honestly some of these are probably about to come down anyway, so if someone were… to push too… hard…” The crocodile rammed his shoulder against the peeling wallpaper, watching in satisfaction as the rotted wood splintered away almost immediately. “…It would come apart. What a shame. We could probably check some of the other rooms as well, but we need to confirm if this building is hiding more of that jewelry or not.”

”Agreed. According to that list I saw and what you gathered from Mr. Lizard I am fairly certain that this building should be…” Espio trailed off, and Vector tensed.

”Es? You good?” He asked.

”I…” A puddle splashed slightly, and Vector jumped as the water dripped off his invisible friend. “I don’t believe we are alone. I can sense another presence.”

”Sense? What do you mean?” Vector asked, guard skyrocketing.

”I can’t explain it, but a ninja is taught to detect threats before they even reveal themselves.” The chameleon’s volume fluctuated, insinuating that he was turning in a slow circle. “It could be a change in draft, the temperature, a sound… I only know that something is not right here.”

”Well stay invisible.” Vector looked around, eyes narrowed. “Hello? Is someone there?”

Of course no one replied, but that only made Vector all the more uneasy. Perhaps it was just a form of trauma haunting them and making them believe someone to be tracking them down, but Espio didn’t seem to be as affected as that near-death experience as Vector had been. But then again the chameleon hadn’t sensed the gun trained on them, so perhaps his ‘ninja sense’ or whatever was off. He took a deep breath and examined the rubble of the wall, gingerly picking at the damp shards of wood in search of anything of value. He didn’t immediately see any shine, and he supposed it was fair that the first room he searched wouldn’t be the jackpot. He needed to be patient and strategic about this. “Hey Es, did that journal say anything else other than the general locations—“

Shing!

Vector yelped in surprise as one of Espio’s knives shot out from thin air, headed toward the rafters where there was a slight scuffle and curse before something dropped and clattered to the ground. He hurried over to it, heart dropping as he recognized that familiar weapon that had almost taken himself and Espio out the other day. Something wet dropped on his head and he scrambled back, wiping it off and stiffening at the crimson that glistened on his hand. He looked up sharply, hearing an angry, hushed voice ring out.

”*Ty uronil pistolet? Kak ty uronil oruzhiye?*” Hissed a heavily-accented male voice, and Vector felt his stomach clench.

”*Khameleon udaril menya nozhom! Eto ne moya vina!*” Came a second, feminine voice. “*U tebya vsyo eshchyo yest pistolet! Ubei ego!*”

”*Kak ya mogu vystrelit’ v togo, kogo ne vizhu?*” Scowled the first voice again before a third voice entered the conversation, one Vector knew quite well.

”*Tak ty govorish’ po-russki?*” Espio asked, and to Vector’s horror he heard the voice near the others, up in the rafters. When had the chameleon gone up there? What was he thinking?! Two surprised exclamations rang out in unison, mirroring Vector’s own reaction.

”*Kak rebyonok syuda podnyalsya? Ty chto-nibud’ slyshal?*” The first voice asked harshly.

”*Eto ne vazhno! Ubei ego!*” The second voice snapped right before the sounds of a struggle began to commence.

”Espio?! Get back down here!” Vector panicked, hurrying around uselessly on the ground as he made out shadowy figures in the darkness fighting with an invisible source. “What did I just say about—“

Bang! Bang! Bang!

”ESPIO!” Vector shouted, covering his head as the shots rang out. No body fell to the ground, which was promising, but Vector still felt his entire body tense up. “Get outta there! I’m coming just… just uh…” He looked around desperately, knowing that his size and weight would never allow him to safely rest on the rafters. Wait… wait that was a clue, wasn’t it?

The perpetrators must be smaller, lightweight mobians, perhaps even good climbers like Espio was as a chameleon. But how could he possible think right now when his boy was up there trying to fight two-versus-one while his enemies had a literal gun?! More shots rang out and Vector ran over to a beam, trying to hoist himself up it. “Hang on Es… I’m coming…”

The male voice cried out in pain and surprise, angrily yelling something at his partner that Vector couldn’t make out.

He was too busy trying to figure out how to help his son.

“You dropped your gun? How did you drop your weapon?” Espio nodded in satisfaction to himself as his knife found it’s mark, stealthily hurrying over to a beam and starting to climb. He’d determined that the unwelcome presence was originating from the rafters, and the second he’d seen the smallest glint of metal he’d thrown his knife defensively at it with pinpoint precision—not taking any chances. Interesting though… the speakers were not conversing in English.

”The chameleon stabbed me! It wasn’t my fault!” Espio almost rolled his eyes at the pathetic excuse. As if someone could compete with his training! He finally spotted them—two monkey mobians balancing in the rafters. Both had dark brown fur with tan muzzles, older than Espio would’ve expected but still lithe, a female and a male. The female glared at her partner. *“You still have your gun! Kill him!”*

”How can I shoot someone I cannot see?” The male snapped back as Espio finally hopped up next to him, tilting his head as he tried to determine the language.

”So you speak Russian, then?” He asked, and both of them were nearly startled out of their skin.

”How did the child get up here?! Did you hear anything?” Asked the male in surprise, and the female deftly got into a fighting stance on the beam.

”It doesn’t matter! Kill him!” She exclaimed, and Espio silently leapt away as a punch landed on the spot where he had been. Espio could hear Vector panicking below him but he didn’t pay any attention to it—he needed to focus before these mobians could hurt the crocodile he’d come to hold in high regard.

He would not lose someone like that again.

Espio dodged as more shots akin to the one last night rang out, tensing as the projectiles pierced right through the wood behind him in the blink of an eye. He slipped another knife out of his boot and sent it flying into the shoulder of the female, who cried out in pain. Espio clenched his jaw against the emotions the sound threaten to prevail, reminding himself that he was never supposed to react.

That was the way of the ninja, after all.

“*Kill him! Kill him now! He’s hurting me!*” She hissed, angrily reaching out for her attacker but only finding that the chameleon had leapt away.

”*For the last time I cannot see him! How can I kill him if he won’t show himself?*” The male growled. “*Grab him next time! I shouldn’t have listened to that stupid lizard… he better know that this is gonna cost those precious others big!*”

”*I’m going to snap that chamelon’s neck! Then I’m gonna snap the necks of those other two after all the trouble we’ve gone through!*” The female snarled as she whipped around, snatching the bloody knife from her flesh and holding it out defensively. Red was already staining the fur and cloth around her wound and she swayed slightly, struggling to regain her balance. “*Get ready to shoot! He can’t stay invisible forever!*”

Espio dodged a stab from the blade and leapt aside, yelping as the female finally managed to grab his tail and yank him back. He latched onto her as she lost her balance and sent them both in a free fall, hearing her scream pierce his ears as she wrestled with him and tried to get him off. It was a fight of who would be on top when they hit the ground below, which was coming up to meet them quickly…

”Gotcha!” Vector lunged forward to catch the both of them, immediately turning his attention to the monkey and trying to pin her down. “Get away from Espio you—“

Bang bang bang bang bang—

”Espio get down!” Vector shouted, but before Espio could even react he felt a burning pain sear his side, hissing as the sensation made his legs buckle. He could vaguely hear shouting as he hit the ground but couldn’t make any of it out, flickering back to visibility and curling up as he desperately tried to ward off the agony. What the… what even was that? Was that the gun? Vector wasn’t kidding…

Vector was shouting something. Chaos, he sounded *livid*. Espio doubted he’d ever heard the crocodile that angry and it made him tense up in discomfort. There was the shuffling sound of someone hastily turning around before suddenly Vector was at his side, voice softer now but no less intense with worry.

”Hey hey hey, kid? Can you hear me? Hang in there—ya gotta just stay awake… oh Gaia don’t pass out on me now…” Vector’s voice came to him in bursts from the ringing in his head, and he whimpered as he automatically leaned into the warmth that surrounded him. He was so cold and everything hurt and there was this awful smell and he couldn’t *focus* oh why couldn’t he focus…

”Hang in there Es! We’re gonna… we’re gonna get you help, okay? Just try to focus on my voice… stay awake…” Vector’s voice sounded far away and higher than usual… was he crying? Why was he crying? Wait, were they still under attack? Was that a part of the weird smell? Even his tail, which was still dragging on the ground along with his boots, felt cold and wet as if it were dipped in a small stream trickling past and spreading across the floor. It was quite an unpleasant sensation, and Espio lifted his head to look around but Vector hugged him closer to his chest. “They got away Es… it’s okay now. They were shouting something

as they ran and I don't know if they're looking for that other gun but… but we gotta get you outta here. I know it hurts but just… just stay awake… I think that's right…"

The putrid stench only grew stronger and his face wrinkled up in discomfort, whining and hiding his face in Vector's chest. What was that smell? It was so strong and awful and Espio already had a pounding headache and his side hurt so bad and he just wanted it all to be over…

"Geez what even is this stuff? Is there a leak somewhere or… wait… WAIT IS THIS GASOLINE?!" Vector suddenly exclaimed, and Espio shrank back at the sheer volume of the panic in his voice. "Oh chaos it's… it's everywhere! We need to get out—"

Espio let out a choked cry of pain as his injury was jostled, Vector taking off bolting towards the exit. What was wrong with him? And what even was 'gasoline'…

Suddenly a deafening crash rang out, almost as if thunder itself was in the building and resounding an entire cacophony. Heat seared against Espio's side as Vector collapsed to the ground, the crocodile wrapping himself around the chameleon as tightly as he could and trying to get up just as the roof began to collapse.

Chapter End Notes

… so uh, looks like Espio got shot! Heh! Hopefully everything works out… heh… hehe…

Next chapter out Thursday, so see ya then! :D

End Notes

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